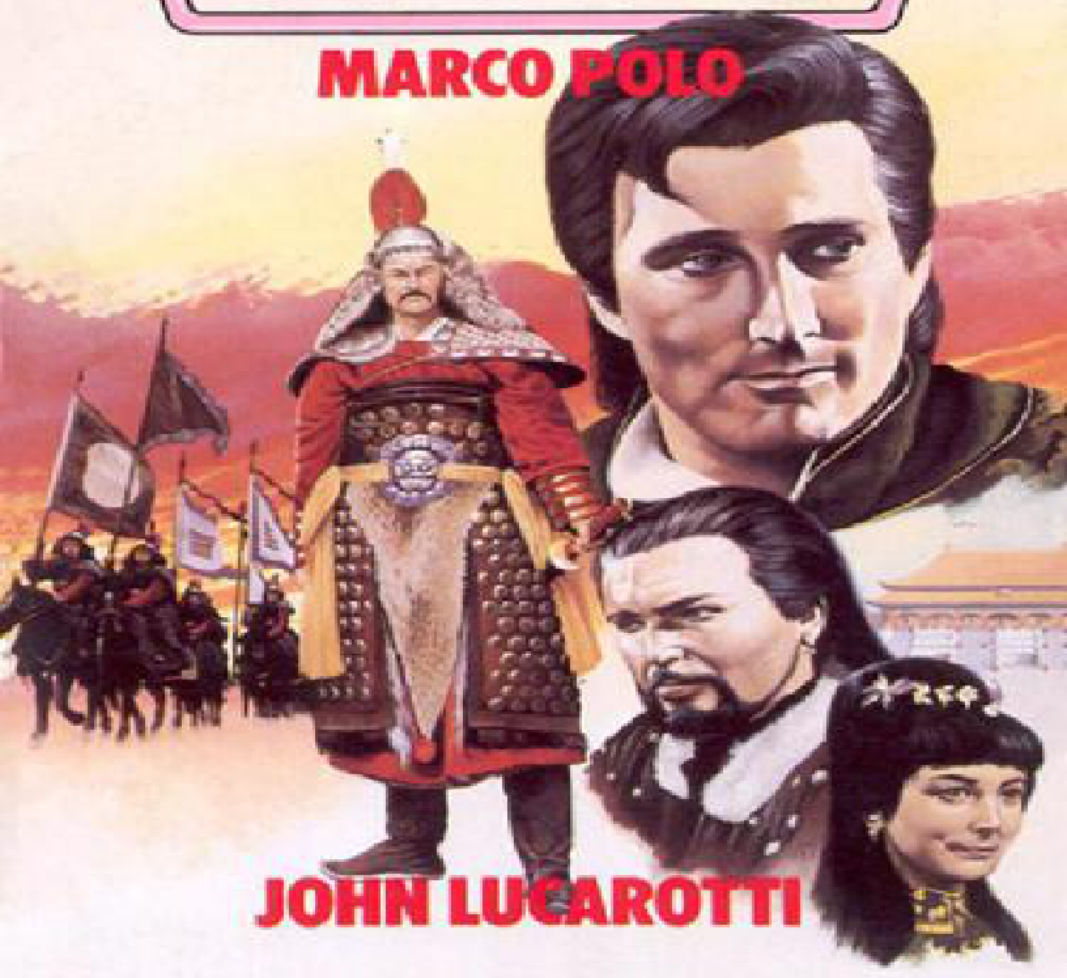
No. 94

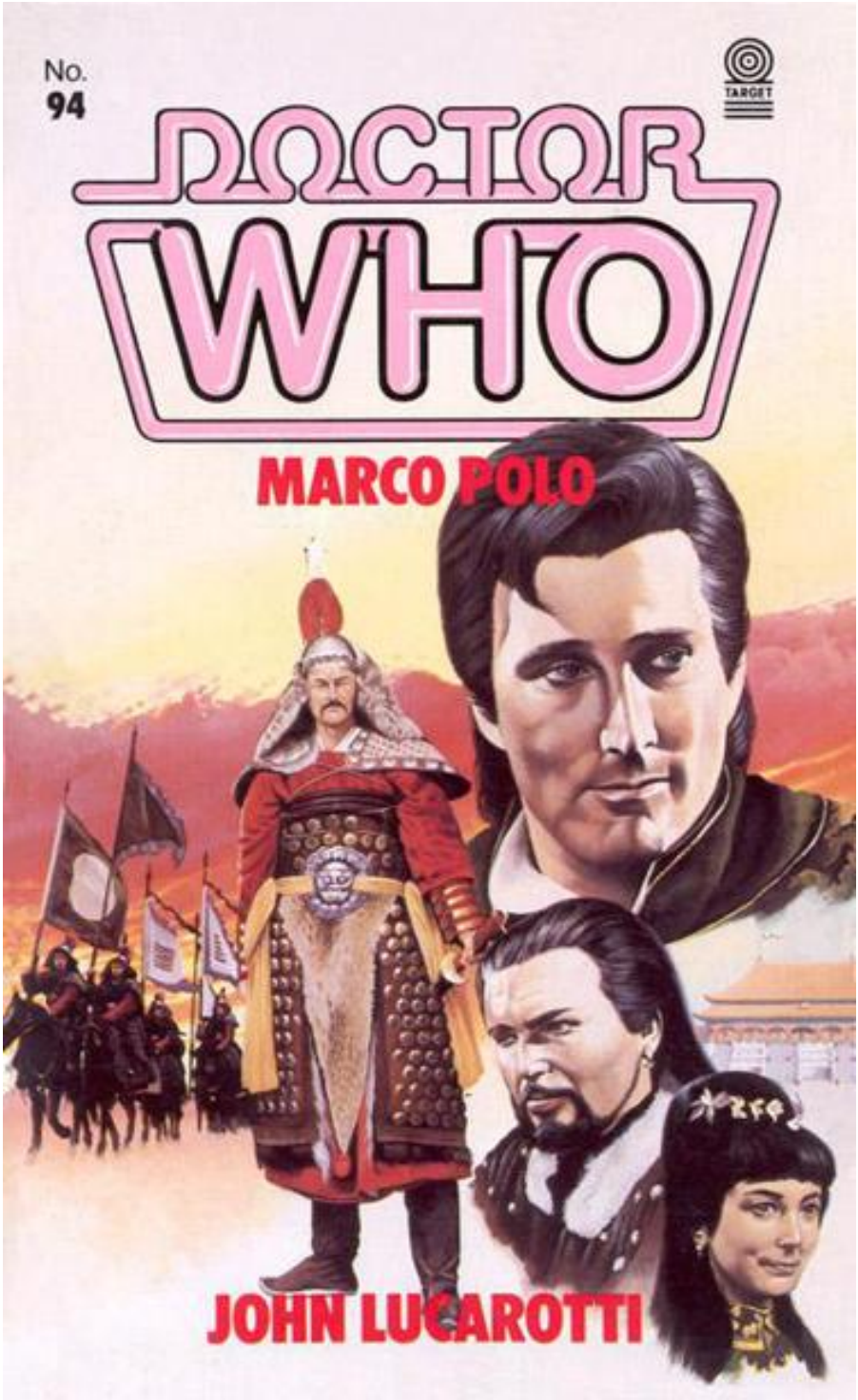
TARGET

DOCTOR WHO

MARCO POLO



JOHN LUCAROTTI



The young Venetian Marco Polo is on his way to the Emperor's court in Peking when he meets the intrepid time-travellers, for the TARDIS

has landed on Earth in the year 1289.

Marco Polo recognises in the TARDIS a means of winning favour with the Emperor. But in the end the Doctor has no one but himself to blame for the loss of his wondrous travelling machine – which he gambles away to Kublai Khan . . .

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DOCTOR WHO

MARCO POLO

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1

Roof of the World

‘It’s freezing cold outside,’ Susan said, looking at the external temperature thermometer in the TARDIS, ‘minus twenty.’

‘Fahrenheit or centigrade?’ Barbara asked.

‘Centigrade,’ Susan replied. Ian did a rapid mental calculation.

‘Thirty-six degrees of frost, fahrenheit,’ he said. ‘Chilly.’

‘Chilly, where chilly, Grandfather?’ Susan asked. The Doctor went to the digital time-orientation printout on the central control panel and pressed the appropriate button.

‘Earth,’ he said, ‘in the year one thousand two hundred and eighty-nine.’

‘Certainly not the Caribbean, then,’ Ian muttered.

‘There’s no call for sarcasm, Chesterton.’ The Doctor sounded vexed. ‘We’ll move on.’ He operated the dematerialisation control and all the lights went out.

Hastily, the Doctor took his pencil-torch from his breast pocket and shone it on the main fuse box.

‘The circuit-breaker’s jumped,’ he said, ‘must’ve been a minor overload somewhere.’ He reconnected the breaker but nothing happened. ‘I can’t work by torchlight,’ he added testily. ‘Open the door, someone.’

‘What? In minus twenty!’ Susan exclaimed.

‘Put on your coat, child,’ the Doctor replied, ‘but open the door so that I can see what I’m doing.’

‘It might be the middle of the night,’ Barbara observed.

‘And it might equally be the middle of the day,’ the Doctor retorted. Ian opened the door and was hit by an icy gust of wind. He shut it

quickly.

‘Daylight,’ he reported.

‘Then wrap up warmly,’ the Doctor advised.

‘You’d think that something as sophisticated as the TARDIS would have a stand-by emergency lighting system,’ Ian grumbled.

‘It doesn’t need one,’ the Doctor snapped. ‘This situation can’t happen.’ Out of respect, the others refrained from pointing out that it could and had.

Using the pencil-torch for light they put on their warmest clothes and Ian opened the door again. The sunlight reflected off the snow was blinding and they had to squint against it whilst their eyes adjusted.

Ian, Susan and Barbara went outside.

‘Where are we?’ Susan asked.

‘The Arctic, Antarctica, the Andes, Siberia, the Himalayas,’ Ian replied, ‘but not the Alps.’

‘Why not?’ Barbara said. Ian grinned at her.

‘No one’s yodelling.’

‘Look at those.’ Susan was awestruck as she pointed to the huge prints in the snow.

‘A yeti, an abominable snowman,’ Barbara ventured. Ian shielded his eyes and looked at the horizon. There were mountains all around but the TARDIS stood on an undulating plateau.

‘I don’t know where we are,’ he murmured.

‘On the top of the world, perhaps,’ Susan said.

‘Possibly,’ Ian replied as the Doctor came to the door of the ship.

‘Chesterton,’ he called, ‘may I have a word with you?’

Ian went back into the TARDIS. On the central control panel was a small black box with a hole burnt in one side.

The Doctor picked it up.

‘We are in dire straights, young man,’ he said. ‘This is the energy distributor for the TARDIS and it’s gone to pot.

No heat, no light, no power, nothing.’

‘How long will it take you to repair it or make another one?’

‘Three or four days,’ the Doctor shrugged, ‘longer than we have to live. We’ll freeze to death inside because as it becomes colder the interior will turn into a cold storage room.’

‘And outside, we’ll freeze to death anyway,’ Ian added.

The Doctor nodded. ‘Then I’d better find fuel for a fire to keep us warm.’

‘Up here?’ the Doctor exclaimed, ‘what do you expect to find?’

‘Heaven only knows,’ Ian replied, ‘but I must try.’ As Ian went to the door the Doctor asked him to send in Susan to help him.

When Susan had gone, Ian told Barbara the truth of the situation.

‘What are we going to do?’ she asked.

‘Follow those imprints. You go in one direction and I’ll take the other. But not too far,’ he warned. ‘Remember how cold it is and you must be able to get back. So be careful and shield your eyes as much as you can against the glare.’

Barbara nodded and they set off in different directions.

Ian spread out his gloved fingers and held his hands at right angles in front of his eyes, peering through the gaps as he followed the tracks. Barbara cupped her hands in front of her eyes, looking through the space between the sides of her palms and little fingers which meant she had no lateral vision at all unless she turned her head from side to side.

The snow was crisp and hard. Barbara thought it was probably very deep but packed, as her boots only sank into it as far as her ankles. Suddenly, she saw a second set of prints cutting across the ones she was following. She turned her head and saw a furry monster standing on its hind legs staring at her. Barbara’s cupped hands dropped down to her mouth and she screamed. It frightened the monster which lumbered off down an incline and out of sight just as Ian stumbled

breathlessly up to her. Barbara pointed out the direction it had taken.

‘A monster, all fur, except for its eyes which were narrow slits, was standing upright and staring at me.’

‘A yeti?’

‘About your height.’

‘Then human perhaps, wrapped up against the cold.’

‘I don’t know. I was just so scared.’

Ian put his arm around her. ‘I’ll take you back to the TARDIS.’ They retraced their steps and told the Doctor and Susan what had happened. The Doctor looked at Barbara.

‘Did you notice anything distinctive about it?’ he asked.

‘Its eyes. They were narrow slits,’ The Doctor turned back to Ian.

‘Snow blindness mask,’ he said, ‘which would mean it’s human. And if that’s so, there must be shelter nearby.’

‘I agree with you, Doctor,’ Ian replied.

‘Then we’ll shut the shop and follow the prints.’ The Doctor was brisk and business-like, then he looked at each of them in turn. ‘After all,’ he added, ‘we’ve nothing to lose and everything to gain.’ The Doctor pulled down the side flaps of his fur hat over his ears, tied the strings under his chin, put on a heavy pair of gloves, wrapped a scarf around his neck and locked the TARDIS when they were outside.

They made their way to the point where the tracks crossed, by which time the Doctor was struggling for air.

‘So rarified up here,’ he gasped, ‘will you help me, Chesterton?’ Ian took the Doctor by the arm as they followed the second set of prints to the edge of the slope.

‘Look!’ Susan exclaimed. Below them about two hundred yards away was a magnificently coloured tent surrounded by smaller, more simple ones. There were also six covered wagons with long-haired oxen huddled together.

Ian tapped the Doctor on his arm and mouthed the word ‘look’, pointing to his own shoulder with his thumb.

The Doctor looked cautiously behind them. There were seven fur-clad warriors with scimitars in their gloved hands. One of them, taller than the others and more richly dressed, stood slightly in front. Both Susan and Barbara gasped when they saw them.

'Don't move,' the Doctor murmured as the leader came towards them and silently inspected each one in turn.

'We are travellers lost upon this mountain,' Ian said,

'and we ask you for shelter.' He pointed to the tents as a man came out of the main one. The leader unbuttoned his collar to reveal a hard, determined mouth.

'Hear me, Mongols,' he proclaimed, 'in these parts there live evil spirits who take to themselves our likeness to deceive us and lead us to our deaths. So let us now destroy these spirits while they still retain our form or else they will destroy us.'

'That's not true,' Ian protested, 'we're not devils, we are human beings like yourselves.'

'Cut them down,' the leader cried and the six warriors came towards them.

'Stop Tegana, put up your scimitars, all of you,' yelled the man Ian had seen come out of the tent. Tegana turned to him.

'Would you have us killed?' he protested. 'These are evil spirits.'

'I command you, in the name of mighty Kublai Khan, whose seal I carry, to put up your scimitars,' the man replied. Reluctantly, Tegana obeyed and the others followed suit. The man looked at the Doctor and then turned to Ian.

'The aged one has mountain sickness,' he said. 'We shall help him to the tent.' Ian and the man took the Doctor, gasping for air, by his arms and virtually carried him down the slope. Susan and Barbara were studying the man as they followed. He was tall and handsome, in his mid-thirties, Barbara thought. He wore a fur hat, a long leather coat with a fur collar and cuffed and hemmed with fur trimmings.

'Who do you think he is?.' Susan whispered.

'I was asking myself the same question,' Barbara replied.

‘He’s not a Mongol, he’s European and he mentioned Kublai Khan, a great Mongol ruler who governed all of Asia in the second half of the thirteenth century.’

‘And according to the TARDIS, we’re in 1289,’ Susan added.

‘Right,’ Barbara said, ‘and Kublai Khan had in his service a young Venetian named Marco Polo.’

‘I’ve heard of him,’ Susan was excited. ‘He told stories of his journeys and all the marvellous things he’d seen. Do you really think it’s him?’

Barbara smiled. ‘Even if I’m wrong I’m very grateful to him for saving us from Tegana, whoever he may be, and his friends.’

As they reached the tent the Doctor admitted he was quite out of breath. It was a tent inside a tent, double-skinned to keep out the cold, and the inner one was lined with furs to retain the heat of the fire which burned in the hearth at the centre. The back of the inner tent was sectioned off into three separate compartments. There was a carpeted hide ground sheet with stools and small tables. Ian and the man took the Doctor over to a stool beside the fire and sat him down. The man clapped his hands twice and a pretty Chinese girl, of Susan’s age, came out of one of the compartments.

‘Ping-Cho, we have visitors,’ he said, ‘who are cold and hungry.’

‘Yes, Messer Marco,’ she replied as Barbara and Susan exchanged a glance. Ping-Cho went to a pot suspended over the fire, took a spoon from the hearth, scooped out some liquid which she poured into a goblet and handed it to the Doctor.

‘Tea, my lord?’ she asked in a small sing-song voice.

‘And very welcome too, my dear,’ the Doctor replied, sipping it. Marco smiled at the Doctor.

‘I fear the liquid is not too warm,’ he said apologetically,

‘but the cold is so intense it even robs a flame of its heat.’

‘It’s not the cold,’ Ian said, ‘the liquid boils at a lower temperature because there is so little air up here.’

‘The air is responsible?’ Marco looked puzzled.

‘Rather the lack of it,’ Ian replied, ‘just as the lack of it gave the

Doctor mountain sickness.' Marco still didn't understand.

'Your family name is Polo, I believe,' Barbara said brightly.

'It is, my lady. I am Marco Polo in the service of the mighty Kublai Khan.' He smiled. 'But I do not know who you are.'

'We're travellers,' said the Doctor between sips. 'I am the Doctor. This is my granddaughter, Miss Susan Foreman, Miss Barbara Wright and Mr Ian Chesterton.'

Marco smiled a greeting to each one.

'My companions are the Lady Ping-Cho and the War Lord Tegana.' Susan smiled at Ping-Cho who joined her hands in prayer and bowed to them. 'We travel to Shang-Tu,' Marco added.

'That's in China, isn't it?' Barbara asked. Marco looked perplexed.

'I have journeyed to many countries, my lady Barbara, but I have never heard of China. Shang-Tu is in Cathay.'

Barbara put her hand to her forehead.

'Of course, it is,' she said, 'how silly of me.' Marco looked at them, intrigued, and Tegana stood suspiciously at the entrance to the inner tent.

'You must all be weary.' Marco set about rearranging their sleeping accommodation, putting Susan with Ping-Cho, giving his compartment to Barbara and adding that the gentlemen would sleep in the main area. The Doctor stood up and Ping-Cho took the goblet from him.

'We are deeply in your debt, sir,' he said, 'for you have saved our lives twice-over.' Tegana's hand tightened around the hilt of his scimitar. Marco smiled at the Doctor and admitted that he was curious to know why they had been wandering around on the Plain of Pamir with nightfall rapidly approaching.

'Our caravan broke down up there,' the Doctor waved his hand in the general direction.

'A wheel, an axle?' Marco enquired.

'Something of that nature,' the Doctor said vaguely.

'Then, either repair it quickly or abandon it,' Marco replied, 'for we

must journey on tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow!' The Doctor echoed the word.

'We cannot stay here,' Marco said, shaking his head.

'Those who travel to Cathay call this place the roof of the world, to be traversed as quickly as possible.' Barbara, Ian and Susan glanced at one another. 'So whilst we strike camp, I will lend you two of my bearers to help you to repair it or take your personal possessions from it and abandon the caravan where it is.' For the life of him, the Doctor couldn't think of a suitable reply.

2

Emissary of Peace

Ian stood outside the tent and looked at the moonlit sky.

The stars appeared to be so close he felt he could reach up and touch them. For a few minutes the silence and stillness were absolute but then he became aware of the sound. It was a thump, thump, thuummp, thump, thump, thuummp beat which at first he couldn't identify. Then the truth dawned on him. He was listening to his own heart, so he decided it was very cold indeed, and went back inside the tent where Marco and Tegana were sitting beside the fire.

The Doctor, wrapped warmly in his furs was fast asleep.

Marco looked at Ian who scooped some tea into a goblet from the pot suspended above the fire.

'Did you touch a star?' Marco asked with a smile.

'Almost, but my heart said no,' Ian replied. Marco chuckled as Ian sat down beside them. Tegana's face remained impassive.

Ping-Cho and Susan lay cocooned in their fur beds.

'Are you asleep, Susan?' Ping-Cho whispered.

'Yes,' Susan replied, and they both giggled.

'Where are you from?' Ping-Cho asked.

'That's not an easy question to answer.'

‘You do not know where your home is?’ Ping-Cho was astonished.

‘My grandfather and I have been travelling for a long time,’ Susan explained, ‘and we have many homes in many places. What about you?’

‘I come from Samarkand where my father is a government official.’

‘But Marco said he was going to Shang-Tu. Are you on holiday, then?’

‘No,’ Ping-Cho replied, ‘Kublai Khan’s summer palace is there and that’s where I shall be married.’

‘Married!’ Susan’s whisper was shocked. ‘How old are you?’

‘I am in my fifteenth year.’

‘So am I. You’re much too young to marry.’

‘Is it different in your land?’ Ping-Cho asked and explained that in Samarkand it was the custom. Susan wanted to know if Ping-Cho’s future husband was handsome.

‘I do not know,’ she replied. ‘I have never met him.’ In the warmth of her bed, Susan thought about it.

‘Why are you marrying him?’ she finally asked.

‘It has been arranged by my family,’ Ping-Cho replied.

‘What do you know about him?’

‘He’s a very important man.’

‘Lots of influence, then.’

‘Yes.’

‘Young, hopefully good-looking and influential. You could do worse, I suppose.’

‘Oh, he’s not young, Susan. He’s seventy-five years old.’

‘He’s what?’ Susan exploded.

‘Ssssshhhh,’ Ping-Cho whispered, ‘you’ll wake everybody up.’

‘You’re the one who needs waking up,’ Susan whispered back.

At dawn whilst the Doctor and Ian were still asleep, Marco and Tegana went up onto the plateau to look at the TARDIS. Marco walked around it several times. Tegana stood back watching suspiciously.

'You should have let me kill them,' he said as Marco touched the door, 'they are evil spirits, sorcerers, magicians.' Marco turned to him.

'Magicians, yes, if the four of them can travel in so small a caravan without wheels and no oxen to draw it,' he agreed, 'but neither evil spirits nor sorcerers. I believe them to be travellers though I admit I know not from where they come. They use different words, their mode of dress is unusual and, in my travels, I have seen many things which surpass my comprehension but this' - he pointed to the TARDIS - 'is the strangest of all.'

'Let him explain it,' Tegana replied as Ian came striding towards them.

'Good morning,' he said cheerily, 'I thought I might find you here.'

'This is your caravan?' Marco asked.

'Actually, it's the Doctor's,' Ian answered.

'But it has no wheels,' Marco observed. 'How does it move?'

'It flies,' Ian said casually, 'through the air.' Marco looked at him intently.

'Are you of the Buddhist faith?'

Ian shook his head. 'Why?'

'At the Khan's court in Peking I have seen Buddhist monks make goblets of wine fly unaided through the air to offer themselves to Kublai's lips,' Marco replied, adding that although he had seen it he did not understand how they did it. 'And there is room enough inside for all of you?' he continued.

'Loads,' Ian said. Marco went back to the door.

'You enter here?' he asked.

'But it's locked and the Doctor has the key,' Ian replied.

'And it is damaged,' Marco said. Ian nodded. 'Then we shall make a sledge and take it with us. But we must make haste,' he added, 'I want

us off the Plain of Pamir by nightfall.' Marco strode away back towards the camp where, under the Doctor's watchful eye, Ping-Cho was preparing a soup while Susan set out plates, bowls, spoons and chopsticks on the tables around the fire. Barbara came out of her compartment.

'That smells good, Ping-Cho,' she said, 'what is it?'

'Bean sprout and chicken broth, Miss Barbara,' Ping-Cho replied.

'With all sorts of other goodies thrown in,' Susan added.

'It's making my mouth water in anticipation,' the Doctor said. Ping-Cho glanced at him with a smile and inclined her head.

'My lord is kind,' she remarked.

'But it surprises me to find the daughter of a high government official acting as the cook to Marco Polo's retinue,' the Doctor added.

'I wish to serve, my lord,' Ping-Cho replied, then admitted that among the Mongols there was a man who called himself a cook but after the first day of their journey no one else would accord him such an honour.

'His name wouldn't be Tegana, by any chance?' the Doctor teased, but Ping-Cho took him seriously.

'Oh, no, my lord,' she said, 'the War Lord Tegana is a special emissary from the camp of a great Tartar ruler named Noghai who has been at war with Kublai Khan.'

'Mongol fighting Mongol,' Barbara observed.

'The war is ended, Miss Barbara,' Ping-Cho explained.

'Noghai has sued for peace and Tegana travels to Kublai's court to discuss the terms of the armistice.'

'For an emissary of peace, he has blood-thirsty habits,'

the Doctor remarked dryly.

The inner tent flap opened as Marco, Ian and Tegana came in. Marco came straight to the point.

'I find your caravan most unusual, Doctor,' he said.

‘It is different,’ the Doctor conceded.

‘Marco has given orders for a sledge to be made to bring the TARDIS here,’ Ian said. The Doctor smiled at Marco.

‘How kind of you, sir. I won’t delay your journey more than a few days to effect the repairs.’

Marco shook his head. ‘I have told you that we cannot stay here, Doctor,’ he said, ‘but we shall spend a few days at Lop.’

‘Where’s that?’ Barbara asked.

‘It’s a town on the edge of the Gobi desert, Miss Wright.’

‘Barbara,’ she corrected him. He smiled.

‘Beyond Kashgar and Yarkand, Barbara.’

‘You’ll take us there, my caravan as well?’ the Doctor asked, and Marco told him that he had once transported an entire army with all its equipment from Cathay to India.

‘All without loss,’ he emphasised. The Doctor smiled.

‘I can work on my caravan as we proceed,’ he said.

‘No.’ Marco’s reply was immediate and determined.

‘Why not?’ the Doctor asked, taken aback. Marco took him by the arm and drew him to one side out of earshot.

‘The Mongols, and the Tartar War Lord Tegana still half-believe you are evil spirits,’ he explained, ‘but they also think that outside your caravan you are harmless.

However, should one of you enter it -’ He raised an eyebrow and left the sentence unfinished. The Doctor rubbed his chin reflectively.

‘Yes, I see the problem,’ he admitted and made up his mind. ‘You saved our lives, Polo. The least we can do is respect your wishes. On my oath, no one will enter my caravan until we reach Lop.’

‘Good,’ Marco replied and, turning to the others, said it was time to eat as there was a lot to be done.

The sledge, made from the sides of a baggage wagon strapped

together with tent stays, was quickly finished. It was pulled up to the TARDIS where, under the combined direction of Ian and Marco, the snow in front of the ship was dug away until the top of the sledge was on the same level as the base of the TARDIS.

'We should be able to push it onto the sledge, now,' Ian said, but Marco had been right when he spoke to the Doctor about the Mongols. They wouldn't touch it so Ian went back to the camp to fetch more dismantled tent stays which he and Marco secured around the TARDIS. Marco put a dusting of snow on top of the sledge, observing that the Doctor's caravan would now slide more easily onto it.

Then he ordered the Mongols to take the ends of the hauls and heave the TARDIS into place. Once that was done, Ian and Marco strapped it to the sledge and the Mongols pulled it to the edge of the slope where Marco gave the command to turn the sledge around so that the hauls were now behind it. Marco told the Mongols to take the strain and they dug their boots into the snow.

'Ready, Ian?' he asked with a grin.

'When you are, Marco,' Ian replied, and the two of them put their backs against the TARDIS and edged it over the incline where it became what it was, a charged sledge, and with whoopings and yellings they all went slithering and sliding down to the camp where a beady-eyed Doctor awaited them.

'Is this to be a regular occurrence, Polo?' he asked frostily.

'No, Doctor, I give you my word,' Marco replied, 'the worst is over.' Ian burst out laughing.

Rapidly the camp was struck, the tents and furnishings loaded onto four baggage wagons with the sledge firmly attached to the last one. The Doctor, Barbara, Susan and Ping-Cho rode in the first wagon, with Marco, Ian and Tegana in the second. The Mongols led the oxen and walked alongside the wagons as the caravan made its slow progress across the plain. Just before dusk Marco called a halt and the camp was pitched although there were fewer tents for the Mongols because of the stays being used to secure the TARDIS. Ping-Cho prepared another soup, hotter this time as they were at a lower altitude and the air less rarefied. As soon as they had finished supper, everyone, with the exception of Marco, went to bed, exhausted by the day's efforts. Marco sat, staring at the flames. His plan had worked; the Doctor had agreed to accompany him to Lop but, glancing over at the sleeping

figure, he wondered what the Doctor's reaction would be when he told him what he proposed to do then.

3

Down to Earth

At first, progress was slow with no more than three leagues a day covered as the caravan came down from the Plain of Pamir, but once they reached the Kashgar valley they more than doubled the daily distance travelled. Still it wasn't enough for the Doctor who was impatiently itching to repair the TARDIS and be off. With Marco's permission, Susan and Ping-Cho would dash off exploring the verdant countryside and woods that surrounded them, while Marco told Ian tales of his adventures in the service of Kublai Khan. Tegana remained aloof, only exchanging a word or two with Marco from time to time. Eventually, they reached Yarkand, a small but bustling town where the Old Silk Road began and along which the commerce and culture of a thousand years to and from Cathay had travelled. The oxen were exchanged for horses and the TARDIS, still on its sledge, was loaded onto a wagon and secured while the Doctor grumbled that he should be allowed to repair it there. But Marco was adamant that the caravan should continue its journey and, besides, the Doctor had given his word.

The journey to Lop, through the undulating farmland, was pleasant. Marco, Ian, Barbara and Tegana were on horseback which meant that the two wagons for the travellers had, in the first, the Doctor muttering irascibly to himself and, in the second, Susan with Ping-Cho giggling, gossiping and playing games. The tent, now without the furs to line it, was pitched in the evenings and Ping-Cho, with both Barbara and Susan helping, would prepare them a 'proper' meal as the Doctor described it.

But, as they approached Lop, the landscape changed: the earth became dry and dusty, the outcrops of green fewer and farther between for Lop was built on the edge of the vast Gobi desert and, whereas Yarkand had been a town, Lop was little more than an oasis, a natural spring, surrounded by tents and wooden shacks. But the main building, the way-station or hotel, was well-appointed. The manager, Yeng, a dignified Chinese who never took his hands out of his jacket sleeves, greeted Marco courteously and gave orders for the horses to be stabled. The baggage train was put into a compound, but the Doctor insisted that the wagon with the TARDIS be placed in the main courtyard where he could keep an eye on it. Smiling, Marco agreed

with him.

‘I shall start work at once,’ the Doctor said. Marco raised a hand and advised the Doctor to relax for a day or two.

Their journey had been long and arduous but now in the comfort of the way-station they could refresh their spirits.

Ian agreed, so reluctantly the Doctor gave in. They were given rooms on the first floor overlooking the courtyard and Susan opted to share one with Ping-Cho. As he reclined in his bathtub, the Doctor grudgingly conceded to himself that Marco had been right to make him rest. All their travel-stained clothes were whisked away to be cleaned and when they met in their flowing, delicately embroidered silken robes for a sumptuous dinner the Doctor wore his mandarin hat at a jaunty angle.

During the meal Barbara remarked that she was surprised to find such comfort in a place as remote as Lop.

‘Kublai Khan has had way-stations built at regular intervals throughout his domains,’ Marco replied.

‘Must cost a packet to stay here, though,’ Ian observed guiltily. Marco held out a gold medallion which was attached to a fine gold chain he was wearing around his neck.

‘Those who travel in the Khan’s service and wear this seal have the right to demand anything they may require,’

he explained, ‘provisions, horses, shelter.’

‘The original credit card,’ Ian murmured to Barbara who was sitting beside him. Quickly she clamped her hand over her mouth and did her best to keep a straight face.

The next morning the Doctor awoke feeling refreshed and energetic after a good night’s sleep in an extremely comfortable bed. His clothes had been impeccably cleaned and returned to his room while he slept, and he hummed a little air to himself as he dressed. Then he went downstairs, ate two small Tan Chiao omelettes stuffed with minced fresh water shrimps and drank a bowl of tea for breakfast.

‘Good morning,’ he said brightly to Tegana, who came in from the courtyard, and announced he was off to work.

Tegana did not reply. The Doctor dabbed his lips with his serviette, took the key to the TARDIS from his pocket and went to the entrance to the courtyard only to find his way barred by two Mongols with drawn swords.

'Stand aside,' he ordered but they remained where they were.

'Please sit down, Doctor,' Marco said behind him. The Doctor turned around.

'What's this about?' he asked, and insisted that Marco call off the Mongols.

'Please be seated,' Marco repeated as Barbara, Ping-Cho and Susan came down the stairs.

'No,' the Doctor retorted, 'I have work to do and we made an agreement, Polo.'

'Hear me out, Doctor,' Marco said as Ian joined the others on the stairs. The Doctor looked around.

'I appear not to have any choice,' he snapped, and sat down folding his arms. Marco beckoned to Ian, Barbara and the girls to join them. Then he joined his hands as if he were praying, put his forefingers to his lips for a moment and turned back to the Doctor.

'My home is Venice,' he said, 'and I left there with my father and my uncle to come to Cathay in the year one thousand, two hundred and seventy-one, eighteen years ago. The journey to Peking took three and a half years. I was twenty-one when we arrived at Kublai Khan's court. I was an alert young man with a facility for languages and a willingness to learn. The Khan liked me.' The Doctor sighed audibly. 'On my twenty-fifth birthday I was given an appointment in his service.'

'1277,' Barbara interrupted. Marco glanced at her.

'Yes. And since then my duties have taken me to every corner of his realm, Barbara, and beyond it. Two years ago, my father, my uncle and I asked the Khan for permission to return home. He refused. Perhaps the three of us had served him too well.' Marco paused and the Doctor leapt in.

'I don't see the remotest connection between the story of your life and my repairing the TARDIS,' he said. Marco spread out his arms.

‘Doctor, I have not seen my home for many years,’ he replied. ‘I want to go back.’ The Doctor unfolded his arms and waved one in the air.

‘Ask Kublai Khan again,’ he suggested. ‘You never know, this time he may oblige.’

‘I intend to ask him again,’ Marco’s voice was firm, ‘but I will not go empty-handed. I shall offer him a gift so magnificent that he will not be able to refuse me this time.’

Ian got the message.

‘The TARDIS,’ he exclaimed, ‘you’re talking about the TARDIS.’ Marco turned to face him.

‘Yes, Ian, the Doctor’s flying caravan,’ he said, as the Doctor jumped to his feet.

‘Polo, you’re mad,’ he cried incredulously. Marco turned back to face him.

‘You can make another,’ he said.

‘In Shang-Tu or Peking?’ The Doctor shook his head in disbelief.

‘You do me an injustice,’ Marco protested. ‘I won’t leave you stranded in Cathay, just as I did not let you die on the Plain of Pamir. No, you will come with me to Venice and make another one there.’ The Doctor began to chuckle.

‘No, Polo, no,’ he said, his shoulders jiggling.

Ian intervened. ‘It’s impossible, Marco.’ Marco looked at him and pointed at the Doctor.

‘Surely, all things are possible for a man who possesses a flying caravan,’ he insisted. Ian argued that it would need all kinds of metals and equipment which could not be found in Venice and that Marco had no idea of the problems involved. The Doctor clutched his sides in suppressed mirth.

‘Nor do you, young man,’ the Doctor chortled, looking at Ian.

‘Then journey home by boat. We trade with every port in the world,’ Marco insisted, ‘and you’ll find all you need.

It may take you longer, but you’ll reach home eventually.’

‘Eventually.’ The word came out as a squeak. ‘He doesn’t know what he’s saying. The man’s a lunatic,’ said the Doctor. Marco’s face was set grim as he turned to the Doctor.

‘No. Desperate. There are many men who are jealous of the Polo influence at the court. And the Khan suffers from an affliction for which there is no cure.’

‘What is it?’ Barbara asked quietly.

‘Old age, Barbara,’ Marco replied, and added that if the Khan were to die before they managed to leave Cathay he would probably never see Venice again.

‘That’s your problem, Polo, not mine,’ the Doctor said as he tried to pull himself together.

‘I have just made it yours, Doctor.’

‘You will see Venice again, Marco,’ Barbara said.

‘I intend to.’ Marco was adamant.

‘But what makes you think the Doctor’s caravan would be a suitable gift for the Khan?’ Ian asked, and pointed out that only the Doctor could make it fly.

‘I told you about the Buddhist monks making goblets of wine fly through the air. They will uncover its secrets,’ he replied, as the Doctor all but doubled up with laughter, which Marco ignored. ‘A caravan that flies, Ian. Do you realise what that would mean to the Khan? It would make him the most powerful ruler the world has ever known.

Stronger than Hannibal, mightier than Alexander the Great.’

‘Oh, dear, oh, dearie me,’ the Doctor gasped with tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks. Marco looked at him.

‘Laugh if you will, Doctor, but my mind is made up,’ he said. ‘Your caravan goes with me to Shang-Tu. Now, give me the key and on my oath I will not enter it until we reach the court.’

Helpless with laughter and to the astonishment of Susan, Barbara and Ian, the Doctor held it out. Marco took the key, strode to the entrance, called off the Mongol guards and went out into the courtyard. The

Doctor collapsed in a chair, almost sobbing with laughter.

‘Oh, dear, oh, dearie me,’ he kept repeating. Susan ran over and shook him.

‘Grandfather, grandfather,’ she cried, ‘why are you laughing? It’s serious.’ Barbara and Ian came over to him.

‘Marco means it,’ Barbara said. The Doctor took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes.

‘Yes, I know he does,’ he admitted.

‘What are you going to do about it?’ Ian asked. The Doctor looked at him for a moment and burst out laughing again.

‘I haven’t the foggiest notion,’ he gasped finally.

Two people who had witnessed the confrontation without making any comment were Ping-Cho, who didn’t understand it, and the War Lord Tegana, who did, and was in the service of the great Khan Noghai.

4

Singing Sands

Relations were strained during the next few days while Marco prepared the caravan for the scorching sands of the Gobi desert. The Doctor kept to himself, brooding in his room, and most of the time refusing to eat the food which Susan took up to him. Naturally, the others were concerned about him and Ian tried remonstrating with Marco who ignored his protests and went grimly about the preparations for the journey. Tegana stood back, watching it all with interest.

Then, one evening as they were eating dinner in silence, Susan came down from the Doctor’s room with his tray of food untouched.

‘Grandfather won’t eat,’ she said, putting the tray on the table.

‘Tell him he must.’ Marco spoke quietly. ‘We start our journey in the morning and the Doctor will need all the strength he can muster.’ Barbara stood up, looked at Susan and Ian and took the tray.

‘We’ll all tell him,’ she said and the three of them went upstairs. Susan knocked on the Doctor’s door.

‘It’s us, grandfather,’ she said, ‘may we come in?’ There was a non-committal grunt from inside, so Susan opened the door and they entered the room. The Doctor was sitting disconsolately on the edge of his bed. Barbara set the tray on the table and explained why he had to eat. The Doctor moved to a stool and stared without interest at the bowls of food in front of him.

‘Come on, grandfather, please,’ Susan pleaded, ‘we need you.’ The Doctor looked at them.

‘It’s the first time I’ve ever let that key go out of my possession,’ he said, ‘I don’t know what came over me.’

‘You’ll get it back,’ Ian replied confidently. ‘Mister Messer Marco Polo’s no match for you, and you know it.

Now, eat something.’ The Doctor toyed with his chopsticks for a few moments. Then he looked at them and smiled.

‘No, he isn’t, is he?’ he remarked before tucking in.

Later, Tegana walked to one of the tents under the palm trees around the oasis and went inside. The Tartar sitting there jumped to his feet and bowed.

‘I greet the War Lord Tegana,’ he said.

‘Our journey commences tomorrow,’ Tegana stated.

‘Follow us with a spare horse. On the fourth night I shall walk back to meet you and we shall return to Lop. Wait a few days and then ride back into the Gobi to collect a present for the all-powerful Noghai that will bring Kublai Khan to his knees.’

‘As the War Lord Tegana commands,’ the Tartar replied and bowed again.

The next morning the Doctor came bouncing down to breakfast.

‘Good morning, everybody,’ he said cheerily and then singled out an astonished Marco for an individual greeting before ordering a bowl of tea and two Tan Chiao omelettes stuffed with chopped water-chestnuts and pork whilst observing that no one should go out into the desert on an empty stomach.

The four wagon caravan set out from Lop. Everyone, except the

Doctor, was on horseback with Susan and Ping-Cho sharing a horse. The Doctor sat beside the driver of the lead wagon which contained their food and water, the second and third wagons carried their tents, cots and baggage while the fourth had the TARDIS and several chickens in a cage strapped onto it. They made good progress along the Old Silk Road on the first day with more than five leagues covered before Marco gave the order to pitch two tents, one for themselves, the other for the four Mongol drivers. Barbara, Ping-Cho and Susan prepared their evening meal while Ian helped Marco to decant some water from the gourds which hung in the first wagon.

'How much water does a caravan like ours use to cross the Gobi?' Ian asked.

'One gourd every five days,' Marco replied, 'so I have allowed eight gourds to carry us to the other side.'

'The bones of many men who thought they carried enough lie bleached in the desert sun,' Tegana said from behind them.

'So we shall all exercise restraint,' Marco added with a smile.

They ate dinner outside the tent under the starlit sky.

'If it's like this all the way, it'll be very pleasant,' Ian commented as he sipped his coffee. Marco's smile was grim.

'Never trust the desert, Ian,' he said. 'This sea of sand will seduce you one minute and betray you the next. It will try to bake you during the day and, sometimes, freeze you during the night. And if you believe in spirits and devils, they live out here. You will hear them.' He finished his coffee and glanced at the Doctor. 'Care for a game of chess?' he asked.

'Very kind of you, Polo, but these old bones of mine are rather weary, so I think I'll turn in shortly,' the Doctor replied. Whilst admitting that he wasn't the best player in the world, Ian took up Marco's challenge. Marco went into the tent and returned with a leather case which contained a box made of ivory and red coral squares so that when it was opened the whole surface made the chess board. Inside the box were the pieces in ivory and coral.

'May I?' Barbara asked, reaching out for the coral king.

'Of course,' Marco replied. Barbara picked it up. The piece had been superbly and delicately carved in the shape of a great Khan seated on

his throne.

‘Ivory or coral, Ian?’ Marco asked.

‘Oh, coral, Ian,’ Barbara said, setting the Khan on his square. When all the pieces were in place even the Doctor admitted it was the most beautiful chess set he had ever seen. Marco smiled.

‘When one moves pieces like these, Doctor, one has the impression one plays a better game.’ The Doctor chuckled.

Tegana stood unsmiling.

‘It is an exercise in the strategies of war,’ he proclaimed.

‘Two equally balanced armies deployed upon a field of battle and each commander determined to be the one who cries "Shah Mat".’ Ian looked at him.

‘Shah mat?’ he queried, and then realised what it meant.

‘The Shah, the Khan, the King is dead,’ Marco said.

‘Your opening, Ian.’ Thirty-seven moves later Marco quietly said ‘Shah mat’, and Ian nodded.

‘Yes,’ he conceded ruefully, ‘checkmate.’ The Doctor, still there with the others, observed that he thought Ian had put up a jolly good fight and then went to bed.

After dinner on the second day, the Doctor accepted Marco’s challenge and routed him decisively on the twenty-sixth move.

‘Shah mat, I believe.’ The Doctor’s eyes twinkled.

‘Yes, checkmate, as Ian would say,’ Marco agreed with a grin, ‘I should have known better than to take you on.’

Silently Barbara and Ian agreed with him.

‘Tomorrow, when the caravan stops,’ Tegana said, ‘it will be between us, Marco.’

‘Very well,’ Marco replied affably.

Once, during the third day of their journey, Marco looked back over his shoulder and thought he saw three horsemen and a riderless horse

following them. But they disappeared in the haze of the shimmering sand and he decided it had been a mirage.

That evening's game of chess had a tension about it, a feeling, unlike the other two, that much more was at stake than a cry of 'Shah mat'. Tegana strutted up and down in front of the board making his moves with extravagant gestures, exulting aloud every time he took one of his opponent's pieces, while Marco sat quietly, determined not to be distracted by Tegana's behaviour.

Thankfully, the match ended in a draw which the Doctor suspected Marco had done deliberately.

There was not a breath of wind on the fourth day's travel and Marco was uneasy although he tried to conceal it.

From time to time he would squint at the cloudless sky or glance back over his shoulder. The Doctor remarked that it was the hottest day yet and Ian reminded him that they were journeying further and further into the desert.

Ping-Cho and Susan played their match after dinner. It ended in a draw which the Doctor knew Susan had planned. Later the two girls lay in their section of the tent with the outside flap open to let in any night breeze that might come up.

'Asleep?' Susan whispered.

'No, I was thinking,' Ping-Cho replied.

'What about?'

'How peaceful the desert is.'

'It's a lovely night.'

'With the moon it resembles a vast silver sea.'

'The metal seas of Venus,' Susan murmured.

'Where?'

'Far, far away.' She hesitated for a moment. 'I've never walked in a moonlit desert. Shall we?'

'If you tell me about the metal seas.'

They got out of their cots and wearing their nightdresses slipped out barefoot into the warm stillness of the night. Susan looked around.

'I dig this,' she exclaimed, 'it's crazy.'

'Ssshhh, the guard'll hear you,' Ping-Cho warned and then looked puzzled. 'What are you going to unearth and why is it insane?' she asked. Susan giggled.

'It's a way of saying you like something very much,' she explained.

'This language of yours is very strange,' Ping-Cho replied, 'but I think I dig it.'

They saw Tegana come out of the tent, say a few words to the guard and stride off across the desert.

'Do you think he's taking the night air?' Susan asked.

'No. He's going somewhere,' Ping-Cho replied.

'In the middle of the desert?' Susan's curiosity was aroused. 'Why not follow him and see?'

'Crazy,' Ping-Cho said and, keeping out of sight of the guard, they followed Tegana into the desert. 'We mustn't get lost, though,' she warned. Susan glanced at the night sky.

'Don't worry, I'll find our way back by the stars.'

They had tracked Tegana for half an hour across the dunes when the wind came up. It was stiflingly hot as though someone had opened an enormous oven door and they saw the cloud swirling across the desert towards them.

'It's a sandstorm,' Ping-Cho cried, 'we must return to the caravan quickly.'

'No, it's too far,' Susan replied, 'we need shelter here.'

'But where?' Already the wind was tugging at their nightdresses and grains of sand were stinging their faces.

Susan looked around desperately.

'Down the side of this dune,' she yelled and the two of them slithered and slid down to the bottom, huddled together and covered their faces

with their nightdresses.

Then the sandstorm struck in all its fury as they cowered against the dune for protection. The searing wind howled and screamed all about them, then suddenly subsided although the sand still swirled around them. For a moment there was silence and then they heard it.

'What's that?' Ping-Cho's voice quavered.

'It sounds like people moaning,' Susan replied and then listened again. 'No, now they're chuckling.' As the two of them clutched each other, the chuckle became laughter which grew in intensity until they were both enveloped in a hideous, demoniacal, hysterical shrieking.

'That sounds like all the devils in hell,' Ian said to Marco as they secured the main flap of the tent.

'I did warn you about the desert,' Marco replied as Barbara came out of her compartment.

'What - what's happening?' She sounded scared. Ian smiled at her.

'It's the sandstorm,' he said.

'But that awful laughter,' she exclaimed.

'Is simply the wind shifting the sand,' Marco explained calmly. 'It's a phenomenon.'

'It's terrifying,' Barbara retorted.

'Not always,' Marco said and told her that at times it could be like musical instruments being played, drums being beaten and cymbals clashed, or it could sound as though a host of travellers were chatting amongst themselves as they crossed the desert, and yet again sometimes it could sound like a single familiar voice calling out your name. 'Almost all people who cross the Gobi fear the singing sands,' he added with a smile.

'Not the Doctor,' Ian remarked, looking at the sleeping figure.

'I'll check the girls,' Barbara said and went to their section of the tent. As she opened the inner flap she was struck in the face by flying sand.

'Ian,' she yelled and both Ian and Marco ran to her side.

'We must close the outside flap,' Marco said.

‘But where’s Susan? Where’s Ping-Cho?’ Barbara cried.

‘One thing at a time,’ Marco replied sharply, ‘the flap.’

Both he and Ian took a deep breath then, holding their hands in front of their faces, plunged into the swirling sand to grab the outside flap which was thrashing wildly in the wind. As they secured it the sand subsided.

‘Open the inner flap fully, Barbara, so we can see,’

Marco said. She unlaced it completely and went into the compartment.

‘They’re not here,’ Ian said quietly.

‘Then where . . .?’ Barbara started to ask and then answered herself. ‘Out there?’ Ian nodded.

‘There’s nothing we can do until the storm’s over, so we’ll wake Tegana and go in search of them as soon as possible,’ Marco said.

‘What about the Doctor? He’s Susan’s grandfather.’

Barbara reminded them. Ian and Marco exchanged a glance.

‘Let’s not worry him yet,’ Ian replied and they went over to Tegana’s bedroll to discover it was empty as well.

‘He must be out there, too,’ Ian exclaimed. Marco knitted his brows.

‘But why? Why are they out there?’ he asked.

Although the sand still swirled around them, the wind had almost completely died down when Susan heard the Doctor calling her.

‘Ssuuussaaannn.’

‘That’s grandfather,’ she said, ‘they must be looking for us.’

‘Not in this, not yet,’ Ping-Cho replied.

‘Ssuuussaannn.’

‘There he is again. I know my grandfather’s voice,’

Susan insisted.

‘Calling out like that, he’d choke on sand,’ Ping-Cho said. ‘It’s a desert spirit.’

‘There’s no such thing. It’s grandfather.’ Susan stood up. ‘We’re over here, grand . . .’ she called out, but stopped short with a mouthful of sand.

Ping-Cho shook her head. ‘It’s not him. It’s a devil, a devil, believe me.’ Then she looked up at the top of the dune and saw him there, a shadowy figure blurred by sand.

Ping-Cho screamed and got a mouthful of land, too.

The storm stopped as quickly as it had struck. The desert was still again, the moon riding high in the star-studded sky. Barbara, Ian and Marco were on the point of setting out to search for Susan and Ping-Cho when they saw them with Tegana approaching the caravan.

‘You’ve had us half-worried to death,’ Barbara chided.

Susan hung her head.

‘It was such a lovely night we went for a walk,’ she said lamely. Marco raised a remonstrating finger.

‘Don’t you ever do that again,’ he ordered.

‘I also chose to go for a walk, will you forbid me that as well?’ Tegana asked. Marco turned to face him.

‘No one leaves this caravan at night without my permission.’

‘I told the guard, was not that sufficient?’ Tegana asked.

‘No, the guard must come and tell me.’ Marco was adamant and reminded them that he was responsible for everyone’s life. Then he told them to sleep as it would soon be dawn and their journey must continue.

‘It’s been a frightening ordeal for them,’ Barbara said looking at Ping-Cho and Susan, ‘for all of us, in fact. Can’t we spend one day here to let everyone recover from it?’

‘No, Barbara, I’m sorry,’ Marco replied.

‘But, surely, one day won’t make that much difference?’

she argued.

‘One day without progress is a day’s water wasted,’ he retaliated, ‘and in the desert that can be the difference between life and death.’ He turned to Tegana. ‘Am I not right?’ he asked, and the War Lord agreed with him.

5

Desert of Death

With the exception of the Doctor everyone was tired yet the day’s progress was good, the caravan covering five leagues before Marco gave the order to pitch the camp for the night. There were no volunteers for a game of chess after dinner and soon the main tent was still. In their compartment Ping-Cho and Susan lay drowsily in their cots looking out at the stars. Susan scratched her head.

‘I still haven’t got all the sand out of my hair,’ she murmured.

‘There were moments last night when I was sure I would never lie here again,’ Ping-Cho replied, snuggling down under her covers.

‘Do you believe what Tegana told Marco about going for a walk?’ Susan whispered.

‘No.’ Ping-Cho struggled to keep her eyes open. ‘He’s not the sort of man who goes for a walk because it’s a nice night.’

‘But why would he lie to Marco?’ Susan asked. ‘He’s an important War Lord, an emissary from, from-’

‘Noghai,’ Ping-Cho said dreamily.

‘To Kublai Khan,’ Susan continued. ‘Why would someone like that lie about walking in the desert?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ping-Cho slurred her words.

‘Odd, isn’t it?’ Susan yawned.

‘What’s odd?’

‘The fact that he did,’ Susan yawned again and closed her eyes.

It was after midnight when Tegana stirred and, arming himself with his dagger, slipped silently out of the tent.

Lurking in the shadows, he looked around for the guard who was leaning with his back to Tegana against the side of the supply wagon. Tegana crept up behind him and with one deft movement slit his throat. The guard died without a sound. Then Tegana cut the ropes securing the wagon's canopy and looked at the seven full gourds of water. One by one he split them open and let the water spill into the desert sand. The gourd they were using he left and went back to his bedroll, sleeping soundly until the alarm was given at dawn.

While the Mongol bearers buried their companion, Marco took stock of the situation. They were four days out from Lop which meant that the gourd they were using had only one day's supply of water left.

'And if we ration it?' Ian asked.

'Three or four days at best,' Marco replied.

'Then we've enough to return to Lop,' Ian said. Marco shook his head.

'No, Ian, that's the one thing we cannot, dare not, do.'

'Why?' Barbara asked.

'Because this was done by bandits. It's happened before, though never to me,' Marco replied. 'They follow you out into the desert, then one night this happens and the caravan is forced to turn back. And when everyone is weakened through lack of water, they attack. Strange, I thought we were being followed two days ago but I decided it was a mirage.'

'Pity,' the Doctor murmured.

'Then we shall stand and fight,' Tegana said, drawing his sword. The Doctor gave him an old-fashioned look and turned to Marco.

'Is there another alternative?' he asked.

'There is a small oasis, Doctor, to the north,' Marco replied, 'but it's one week's journey away.'

'But if we pressed hard, Marco, if we kept going day night, how long then?' Ian was determined. Marco ran the palm of his hand across his face.

'Five days,' he replied, and pointed out that with the water rationed they would be growing weaker all the time so it might still be too far

away. ‘And there is another danger,’ he added. ‘Bandits always camp near an oasis.’

‘But you’re not talking of the same bandits,’ the Doctor observed.

‘No.’

‘If we turn back for Lop an attack is certain, but if we strive to reach the oasis there is the possibility that no bandits will be encamped.’ The Doctor turned to Marco.

‘True, Polo?’ Marco nodded.

‘What you say makes sense, Doctor,’ he conceded. ‘We strike north.’

‘I will not accompany you,’ Tegana proclaimed, putting his sword back in its scabbard. ‘I do not fear these bandits.’

He announced that he would ride back to Lop but he wanted his ration of water for the journey. Marco refused, stating that as the commander of the caravan he was responsible to Kublai Khan for Tegana’s safety and that they would journey north together.

The caravan set off but the sand was no longer packed as on the Old Silk Road. There were stretches where it was firm but suddenly the horses would sink into it to their shanks or the wagon wheels to their axles and a slow, tedious struggle was needed to release them.

As they journeyed deeper into the desert the days became hotter and the nights cooler so Marco ordered that the caravan stopped between mid-morning until mid-afternoon. The tents were no longer pitched but sections were used as canopies attached to the wagons giving shelter from the scorching sun. But each day their progress diminished, five leagues, four, three, two and, finally, one, yet they were still four leagues from the oasis. Just before the end of their rest period on the fifth afternoon, Marco gave everyone a ration of water. As Ian sipped his, he looked at Marco.

‘How much is left?’ he asked.

‘None,’ Marco replied. ‘We have no water until we reach the oasis.’

‘Or until the oasis comes to us,’ the Doctor observed dryly. Ian clicked his fingers.

‘That’s it, Doctor,’ he exclaimed. ‘One of us rides on ahead, fills the

gourd and brings it back.'

'And if there are bandits?' Marco asked.

'We're in trouble enough as it is, so what's the difference?' Ian replied.

'You are from the Occident,' Tegana interjected, 'but I am of their race, a Tartar, and my horse is strong. I shall fetch the water.' Marco thanked him and said they would journey towards the oasis as best they could.

'No, wait here,' Tegana said, but Marco shook his head.

'One step nearer to you is one step closer to water,' he insisted. Tegana shrugged, picked up the empty gourd, slung it across his horse's back in front of the saddle and, mounting, rode off across the desert.

The thought of water spurred everyone to greater efforts to close the distance between the caravan and the oasis but during the early evening the Doctor collapsed from exhaustion.

'Grandfather!' Susan screamed as she ran to his side.

'We'll rig a cot for him in a wagon,' Marco said.

'To be jostled and bumped about?' Barbara protested.

'He needs to rest in comfort. In the TARDIS.'

'How can that be?' Marco exclaimed. 'The flying caravan sits in a wagon yet you say the Doctor would be more comfortable in it. I do not understand.' He fingered the key on the chain with the Khan's seal that hung around his neck.

'Take Barbara's word for it,' Ian was blunt.

'Please, Messer Marco,' Susan pleaded. Marco took off the chain and handed it to Susan.

'The Doctor may ride to the oasis in his caravan and you may travel with him, Susan,' he said, 'but Barbara and Ian remain with me.'

'Fair enough,' Ian agreed, 'but you'll allow me to see the Doctor to his bed?' Marco nodded and Ian picked up the Doctor, and carried him over to the TARDIS as Susan clambered onto the wagon to unlock the door. Using the Doctor's pencil-torch, they took him inside, went to

his room and laid him on his bed.

‘More than anything, he needs water,’ Ian remarked.

‘Without power the water-producer won’t work,’ Susan said, adding that if only Marco had let her grandfather repair the energy-distributor they would not be in such a predicament.

‘We wouldn’t even be here,’ Ian reminded her as he handed her the torch, closed the door behind him, jumped off the wagon and walked over to Marco. ‘The Doctor’s in a bad way,’ he said, ‘and without water he won’t last another twenty-four hours.’ Marco looked at him with a grim face.

‘None of us will, Ian, I know the desert,’ he replied. ‘Our lives are in Tegana’s hands.’ Then he gave the order to break camp.

Tegana reached the oasis before sunset. He approached it cautiously but no one was there. His horse lapped up water greedily as Tegana rinsed his face and with cupped hands slurped it into his mouth. Then he stood up and turned towards the desert.

‘Here’s water, Marco Polo,’ he shouted, ‘come and drink it.’

With nightfall a freezing wind swept down from the north.

‘How can it be so cold in the desert?’ Barbara shivered as she asked Ian who explained that, as hot air rises, cold air sweeps in to replace it, adding that they were not that far south of the Mongolian steppes.

‘You’re too clever by half,’ she murmured, wrapping her cloak more tightly around her.

The caravan struggled on through the bitterly cold night until dawn when the wind died down and the sun rose. It was then that the Doctor felt the drop of water on his cheek. He opened his eyes and felt the walls. They were soaking wet. Susan was still asleep in a chair beside his bed.

‘Susan, wake up,’ he croaked, ‘there’s condensation everywhere. Fetch sponges and jugs quickly before it evaporates.’ Susan switched on the torch and both of them worked frantically for the next half hour mopping up every drop. By the time the TARDIS was dry they had four full jugs. Then they went outside and shouted to Marco to stop the caravan. They set down the jugs on the wagon and the Doctor locked the door.

‘You had this in your flying caravan?’ Marco demanded accusingly while Ping-Cho rationed out the water to everyone.

‘In a manner of speaking, yes,’ the Doctor replied calmly.

‘Why did you conceal it until now?’ Marco was furious.

‘Because it wasn’t there until this morning,’ the Doctor answered.

‘Condensation.’ Ian clicked his fingers.

‘Precisely, Chesterton,’ the Doctor replied and Ian explained to Marco that the hot air trapped inside the TARDIS had cooled out during the night and become water on the walls. Marco shook his head.

‘So much water in so small a caravan, I don’t understand it.’ He sounded perplexed.

‘There are a lot of things you don’t understand, Polo,’

the Doctor replied. ‘Now shall we continue our journey?’

Marco held out his hand.

‘The Khan’s seal and the key, if you please, Doctor,’ he said. The Doctor handed him the chain. As Marco took it he smiled.

‘Thank you for saving our lives,’ he said.

When Tegana saw the caravan on the horizon, he hastily filled the gourd and rode out to meet them with a tale of bandits at the oasis during the night, forcing him to hide until they rode north towards Karakorum in the morning.

6

A Tale of Hashashins

As the slits in the gourds needed stitching, a task Marco gave to the Mongol bearers, he declared that they would spend the day and the night at the oasis before moving on the following morning. The Doctor sat in the shade of a palm tree beside the water-hole and mused.

‘Bandits,’ he said derisively to no one in particular.

‘I beg your pardon, Doctor?’ Ian replied as he lay half-dozing in the sun.

‘Are we agreed, Chesterton, that last night was cold?’ the Doctor asked. Without waiting for a reply he launched himself into a dissertation on the general appearance of the oasis, remarking on its tidiness and emphasising the lack of evidence of a fire. ‘Not a cinder, my dear fellow, anywhere, but we are as one that it was cold last night.’

‘Bitterly so, sir,’ Ian replied.

‘So what did they do, these bandits, sit and shiver?’ the Doctor asked. Barbara, who had been filling a jug with water, looked at him.

‘Isn’t it possible that they didn’t want anyone to know they were here?’ she said.

‘Possible, my dear young woman, but improbable. Of whom would they be afraid? Other bandits? I doubt it.

And certainly not travellers like us. No, no, there were no bandits here last night and Tegana lied because he had no intention of bringing water back to us.’

‘But without the condensation we’d’ve died of thirst,’

Ian exclaimed.

‘That is my point, Chesterton.’

‘But why would he have let that happen?’ Barbara asked.

‘I have my theory,’ the Doctor replied, rubbing his hands together whilst eyeing Ian and Barbara conspiratorially, ‘but let us see what happens next.’

At dawn, after a peaceful night, the caravan left the oasis and travelled south-east towards the city of Tun-Huang some thirty leagues away. It took them six uneventful days to cover the distance and when Susan saw the city on the horizon she remarked to Ping-Cho that she had never seen so many spires before.

‘Tun-Huang is a city famous for its temples,’ Ping-Cho replied and Barbara who was riding alongside them asked if the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas were in the vicinity.

‘Yes, they are,’ Ping-Cho replied.

‘And the Cave of Five Hundred Eyes, Barbara,’ Marco added and asked

if she had ever seen any drawings of it.

Barbara admitted that she had never even heard of it but the name intrigued her.

‘On the walls are carved the faces of two hundred and fifty evil men who lived there,’ Marco explained. ‘They were called the Hashashins.’

‘Hashashins,’ Susan repeated.

‘So named because they used a drug called hashish,’

Marco added.

‘Are any of them still alive?’ Susan asked. Marco shook his head and said they were all put to the sword twenty years previously by a great Mongol conqueror named Hulagu.

‘But the cave is haunted,’ Marco added, ‘and at night their eyes glow.’

‘How fascinating,’ Barbara replied. Marco cautioned her to beware but Barbara laughed and said she wasn’t scared of ghosts.

‘I know a story about Hulagu and the Hashashins,’

Ping-Cho said.

‘Tell it to us,’ Susan asked.

‘Not now, Susan. Later, when we are at the way-station,’

she said, explaining that it needed preparation. Marco winked at her.

The way-station was similar to the one they had stayed in at Lop, with comfortable accommodation and good food.

Chenchu, the manager, was a chubby little Chinese who greeted them extravagantly and showed them to their rooms. Under the Doctor’s supervision, with Ian as an on-looker, the wagon with the TARDIS was placed in the central courtyard. When the Mongol bearers left, the Doctor nudged Ian in the ribs.

‘Now that we shall be staying in places like this from time to time, I shall be able to start work,’ he muttered.

‘I don’t quite grasp your meaning, Doctor,’ Ian replied.

‘The circuit, dear boy, the energy distributor.’

‘Aren’t you forgetting something?’

The Doctor waved a dismissive hand in the air.

‘Everyone’ll be much less vigilant so I shall be able to sneak into the TARDIS and get on with it.’

‘But you handed over the key to Marco at the oasis.’

‘ *A* key, Chesterton.’ The Doctor raised the forefinger of his right hand to emphasise the point. ‘Not that he would know how to use it.’

‘Have you got what I think you’ve got?’ Ian grinned mischievously.

‘You don’t think I spent the entire night sleeping, do you?’ The Doctor sounded quite indignant. Ian chuckled.

‘You made another.’ The Doctor widened his eyes in innocence. ‘Why, you sly old fox,’ Ian exclaimed.

They all bathed and changed into the flowing silk robes provided by Chenchu, and once refreshed went downstairs for their evening meal. The Doctor, as the doyen of the caravan, was once again jauntily wearing a mandarin’s hat and they dined on sesame seed pings followed by soochow chiang, a delicious mixture of pork, mushrooms and bamboo shoots served with a succulent sauce and rice wine. When everyone was finished, Marco suggested they should drink their tea in the way-station’s lounge. As they were going through to it, Susan saw Ping-Cho slip away upstairs. She began to follow her but Marco stopped her gently with his hand.

‘Come and take your tea,’ he said smiling and led her into the room.

When Ping-Cho returned, Susan didn’t recognise her at first. She was wearing a long robe in blue silk with a high collar that came up to her jaw line. Over the robe she wore a knee-length red silk jacket with narrow lapels and billowing sleeves, which was secured around her waist by a yellow sash knotted on one side. Both were richly brocaded, the sash with small butterflies of every colour, the jacket with fawns and flowers and gold and silver stars on the lapels. Slipped over her fingertips were long rainbow-hued nails and in each hand she held an open fan delicately decorated with scenes of people walking in luxuriant Chinese gardens. Her face was powdered white, her cheeks rose, her lips a soft red and her eyes thinly lined in black up to her

temples. From her ears hung short fine gold chains with a cluster of small pearls at the ends. Her hair was piled high on her head and kept in place by three sculptured combs, the two outer ones being coral and the centre one ivory.

She entered the room with short shuffling steps which made her appear as though she were floating. She stopped, fluttered her fans, and bowed. Everyone, even Tegana, applauded and she began to tell her story in a lilting voice at the same time miming it with appropriate gestures of her arms, hands and fans:

‘Gracious maidens, gentle lords

Pray attend me while I tell my tale

Of Ala-eddin, the Old Man of the Mountains Who by devious schemes, evil designs

And foul murders ruled the land.

No host of arms, no vast array

Of banners served this wicked lord

They were but few, ruthless, reckless men Who obeyed his cruel commands.

Thus did he persuade them:

Promising paradise, he gave his followers A potent draught and while they slept Transported them to a vale where streams Of milk and honey, wine and water flowed.

Here were gardens and flowers in bloom Of every hue and essence, here, too

Golden pavilions that outshone the sun, And even the stars of heaven envied

The bejewelled interiors strewn

With silks, tapestries and treasures.

Hand-maidens, dulcet-voiced, soft of face Attended them and thus bemused

Did they dwell in this man-made paradise Until Ala-eddin, intent upon

some evil deed, Proffered again the hashish draught

And brought them sleeping to his castle.

Awakening, they cried "are we cast out Of paradise?" "Not so, go abroad, Seek out my enemies and strike them down But care not for your lives.

Paradise is eternal." Thus terror Stalked the land for many years

Until the day came mighty Hulagu

To stand before Ala-eddin's lair

For three long years in siege

And thus fell Ala-eddin and the Hashashins.

Now honest hands reap harvests of life From the soil where death and evil reigned And those who journey through the vale In wonder are heard to say

"Tis truly paradise today." '

Ping-Cho fluttered her fans in front of her face and bowed as everyone stood up applauding and crowding around her.

'That was delightful, my dear, congratulations,' the Doctor said.

'My lord is kind,' Ping-Cho replied.

'Thank you, Ping-Cho,' a smiling Marco added.

'Yes, it was wonderful,' Ian agreed and turned to Susan.

'Did you know that the Hashashins gave their name to the English language?'

'Assassins,' Susan replied, 'but I always thought that Ala-eddin's lair was on a mountain in Persia.'

'It was,' Ping-Cho agreed, 'Mount Alumet.'

(Out of the corner of her eye, Barbara saw Tegana surreptitiously sidle out to the courtyard and, on the spur of the moment, decided to follow him.)

‘Then who were the Hashashins in the cave?’ Susan asked.

‘Some of Ala-eddin’s sect,’ Marco replied. ‘He had them hidden everywhere awaiting his commands and longing to return to paradise. Here at Tun-Huang, they were in the Cave of Five Hundred Eyes. It’s on the road to Su-Chow about a third of a league away.’

Tegana left the way-station on foot which intrigued Barbara as she kept him in sight through the town and onto the road for Su-Chow. When Tegana reached the Cave of Five Hundred Eyes, he went inside.

‘Malik,’ he called, ‘Malik.’ From the shadows of a passageway at the back of the cave an old, bearded Tartar shuffled forward.

‘Who calls my name?’ his voice quavered.

‘The War Lord Tegana in the service of Noghai Khan.’

Malik bowed.

‘We have waited for you,’ he said.

‘You need wait no more, old man,’ Tegana replied and asked what word Malik had from Noghai.

‘You shall hear it,’ Malik beckoned to him and led him along the passageway from the roof of which hung stalactites. Reaching up, Malik twisted one of them and part of the rock wall swung open to reveal an inner chamber. They went inside and were confronted by three Tartars, one of whom had one side of his face disfigured by a sabre slash.

‘In the name of Noghai Khan, welcome,’ he said and with their right hands they clasped each other by the wrist.

‘What have you to tell me, Acomat?’ Tegana asked.

"He has formed his army and marches now on Karakorum to await word of your success,’ Acomat replied.

‘I shall not fail Noghai,’ Tegana boasted.

‘You did at Lop,’ Acomat reminded him. ‘You were to meet our couriers on the fourth night in the desert.’

‘There was a sandstorm,’ Tegana said and recounted the events which had followed it.

‘What is required of us in Tun-Huang?’ Acomat asked.

‘Follow us as we journey on, then when I give the signal, attack and take the old magician’s caravan to Noghai while I ride to Kublai’s court at Sheng-Tu.’

‘What about Polo and those who travel with him?’ A hard glint came into Acomat’s eyes.

‘Put them to the sword,’ Tegana replied as he flicked a speck of dust from his costume.

Malik shuffled over to them. ‘My Lord Tegana, did a woman accompany you to the cave?’ Tegana shook his head. ‘There’s one in the outer chamber now,’ Malik said.

Tegana crossed to the wall, removed two pieces of rock and peered through the holes at Barbara who stood in the dusk looking at the cruel faces with evil glowing eyes carved on the walls.

Involuntarily Barbara shivered and thought that following Tegana may not have been a good idea after all, but she was intrigued by his disappearance. Cautiously, she went deeper into the larger cave until she came to the passageway. As she groped her way along it, water from a stalactite dripped onto her face, so she took her handkerchief from her pocket and wiped it off. She came to the end of the passageway. In front of her was solid rock.

She turned around and walked with a quickening pace back into the outer chamber. Suddenly, from behind, a hand was clamped over her mouth and her handkerchief fluttered to the ground.

7

Five Hundred Eyes

Ian was the first to realise that Barbara was missing. Susan and Ping-Cho had gone up to their room where Ping-Cho took off her make-up and costume. The Doctor was closeted in his room making final adjustments to the energy distributor before installing it in the TARDIS

while Marco was in the lounge bringing his log-book of their journey up-to-date. Ian went to Barbara’s room and knocked on the door. When there was no reply he looked inside, then checked with the girls and the Doctor. They all came downstairs and Ian went out to the

courtyard calling her name whilst the Doctor told Marco that Barbara was missing.

‘What do you mean - missing?’ Marco looked up with a puzzled expression on his face.

‘Exactly that. Barbara’s not here,’ Ian said, coming in from the courtyard. Marco stood up.

‘What manner of country do you come from where women wander off alone at night?’ he asked angrily as Tegana came in. ‘Is Barbara with you?’ Tegana shook his head. ‘The city’s divided into distinct areas,’ Marco continued, ‘and the three of us will go in search of her.’

‘You’ll not find her,’ Tegana said, ‘by now she will have been abducted.’

‘I’m going to try,’ Ian insisted and left.

‘I’ll help as well,’ the Doctor said. Marco turned to him.

‘No, Doctor, you stay here and both of you as well,’ he said, pointing a warning finger at Susan and Ping-Cho, and then strode out. Tegana shrugged and followed him. Susan looked anxiously at the Doctor and he put his arm around her.

‘Barbara’s an intelligent young woman who can look after herself,’ he said, whilst admitting that she must have had a reason for going out, and went back up to his room wondering what it could have been. Shortly afterwards he came downstairs, went to the courtyard, looked surreptitiously around, unlocked the TARDIS and popped inside. He shut the door behind him and, using his pencil-torch, refitted the energy distributor. Then he flicked on the power switch and the lights lit up.

‘Ha, ha,’ he said jubilantly, ‘stage one completed.’ He slipped several microswitches into one pocket and his miniaturised omni-electrometer into the other. ‘Just verify these circuits and then we’re away!’ He switched off the power and went outside to be confronted by Susan and Ping-Cho. He locked the door hastily.

‘It’s all right, grandfather,’ Susan hissed, ‘you can trust Ping-Cho.’

‘Not much choice, have I?’ the Doctor huffed as he clambered down off the wagon.

‘We think we know where Barbara is,’ Susan added.

‘Where?’ The Doctor led them back into the way-station.

‘Messer Marco was telling us about the Cave of Five Hundred Eyes, my lord,’ Ping-Cho began.

‘And Barbara was fascinated, particularly about them glowing in the dark,’ Susan continued.

‘But why would she go there without telling anyone?’

the Doctor protested.

‘Because the lady Barbara knew that Messer Marco would do all he could to dissuade her,’ Ping-Cho concluded. The Doctor grunted.

‘Do you know where this cave is?’

Susan nodded. ‘On the road to Su-Chow,’ she said. The Doctor clapped his hands.

‘Chenchu,’ he called, and the manager came from the kitchen, ‘where is the Cave of Four Hundred . . .?’

‘Five Hundred Eyes, grandfather,’ Susan interjected.

‘On the road to Su-Chow, about a third of a league from here, my lord, set back against the foothills.’ The Doctor turned to Susan and Ping-Cho.

‘You two wait here,’ he said and started towards the courtyard.

‘My lord goes there now?’ Chenchu wailed. ‘At this hour the spirits of the Hashashins walk abroad.’

‘Fiddlesticks,’ the Doctor replied and went outside where he stopped and looked back at them. ‘The road to where?’ he asked lamely.

‘Oh, grandfather, you’ll get lost, you know you will,’

Susan said in exasperation. The Doctor hesitated and then beckoned to them.

‘Oh, very well, then, come along, both of you.’

‘My lord, you’ll not come back alive,’ Chenchu cried out.

‘It’s the only way I shall come back,’ the Doctor replied airily as they set off.

Before being taken into the inner chamber, Barbara was blindfolded, gagged and her hands tied behind her back.

All the Tartars left except one who, as Tegana was leaving, ran his forefinger across his throat. Tegana nodded, went out and the wall closed behind them. The Tartar tied Barbara’s legs and took off her blindfold. Squatting, she cowered back against the wall when she saw his face. It was plump and jolly until he smiled, revealing blackened stubs of teeth and his eyes almost disappearing behind their lids.

Then it became horrific. He took a knife from his belt and tested the edge of the blade on his thumb. He didn’t cut himself so, still smiling at Barbara, he began honing the blade on the wall.

The Doctor, Susan and Ping-Cho entered the cave and both of the girls gasped when they saw the eyes. The Doctor went over to one of the faces and shone his pencil-torch on it.

‘Quite extraordinary and just as I thought. Quartz,’ he observed. ‘There are veins of it running through the rock structure and these faces were carved very cleverly so that at the eyes the quartz is exposed.’

‘Grandfather, we’re looking for Barbara,’ Susan reminded him.

‘So we are, my child,’ the Doctor said and shone his torch around the cave. ‘Then, let us investigate.’

They searched everywhere, found the passageway and went to the end of it. ‘A fool’s errand, Susan, that’s what you’ve brought me on,’ the Doctor remonstrated as they came out of the passageway, ‘a fool’s errand.’ Ping-Cho saw Barbara’s handkerchief lying on the ground against the cave wall.

‘My lord, look,’ she said, holding it up. Susan grabbed it from her.

‘It’s Barbara’s, grandfather, I know it is,’ she exclaimed,

‘she was here. Barbara. Barbara.’ Her voice echoed around the cave and into the inner chamber where the Mongol stopped honing his knife land took out the two pieces of rock to see into the main chamber.

‘Barbara, Barbara, where are you?’ they called in unison.

The Doctor shook his head.

‘She must’ve left,’ he said. ‘We probably passed her in the dark.’ He began walking towards the entrance to the cave when Susan screamed.

‘The eyes, grandfather, those eyes,’ she cried pointing at the face, ‘they moved.’ But by the time the Doctor reached the face and shone his torch on it, where were only two quartz eyes staring at him. ‘I swear it, grandfather, I promise you,’ Susan insisted, ‘the eyes moved.’

‘Reflection,’ the Doctor said grumpily, adding that it was a wild goose chase and, without doubt, Barbara was nestled in bed at the way-station and sound asleep. Ping-Cho let out a small shriek.

‘What now?’ the Doctor asked testily as she pointed to the entrance of the cave. Tegana, his face hidden in the darkness, stood there, legs astride and his hands on his hips.

‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded.

‘Looking for Miss Wright,’ the Doctor replied firmly. ‘I presume Chenchu told you where we were.’

Tegana nodded and asked why they thought Barbara would be in the cave. Susan held up the handkerchief.

‘This is Barbara’s,’ she said, ‘and we found it over there.’

‘In the passageway,’ Tegana replied, ‘but you have not found her.’

‘Not as yet,’ the Doctor sounded sarcastic.

‘Then let us leave this place. The cave is possessed by spirits,’ Tegana announced.

‘My dear fellow, I am not afraid of ghosts. You maybe but I am not.’ The Doctor’s sarcasm was even more pronounced. Then they heard Ian calling their names and he came into the cave with Marco. Ian was carrying a lamp.

‘I told you not to leave the way-station,’ Marco said angrily.

‘But we were right to come, Messer Marco,’ Ping-Cho protested, ‘the lady Barbara was here.’ Susan held up the handkerchief.

‘But there’s no other sign of her?’ Ian asked.

‘No,’ Susan and Ping-Cho answered in unison.

‘Bring the lamp, Ian, I know all the secrets of the Cave of Five Hundred Eyes.’ Marco led the way to the passageway. Tegana followed him closely, drawing his sword as Marco reached up and twisted the stalactite. The wall swung open to reveal the Mongol standing over Barbara with the knife at her throat. When he saw Tegana, he hesitated and the War Lord rushed in and cut him down before he could stab her.

When they reached the way-station Susan and Ping-Cho helped Barbara to her room where Susan suggested that one of them should stay with her for the night. Barbara smiled wanly, thanked them both, but said that she would be all right. When they were gone she collapsed on the bed, her body racked with sobs of terror and relief.

Marco, Ian and the Doctor thanked Tegana for quick, decisive action. Then Marco announced that they would spend one more day at the way-station to let everyone, especially Barbara, get over their adventure.

‘Everytime I close my eyes I see those eyes in the cave,’

Ping-Cho murmured as they lay in their beds.

‘The ones you see don’t move,’ Susan replied.

‘True,’ Ping-Cho admitted.

‘Do you want to know something?’ Susan asked.

‘Tell me,’ Ping-Cho said sleepily. Susan propped herself up on one elbow.

‘I think Tegana knew about the inner chamber. I think he knew Barbara was in there and I think he killed that man not to save Barbara’s life but to protect his own.

That’s what I think.’ Ping-Cho sat bolt upright.

‘What!’ she exclaimed.

‘So beware of him for the rest of the journey,’ Susan continued, ‘because I think he’s an evil man.’ Ping-Cho lay down again and they were silent for a while.

‘You’ll be leaving soon, won’t you, Susan?’ Ping-Cho murmured.

‘I suppose so,’ Susan replied.

‘I shall miss you.’

‘I shall miss you, too, Ping-Cho.’ And they fell asleep.

8

Wall of Lies

The lies began at dawn. Marco had gone to the stables to check the horses when Tegana came to feed his stallion.

Marco greeted the War Lord and again expressed his gratitude for Tegana’s prompt action which saved Barbara’s life. Tegana filled the water-trough in front of his horse from a bucket.

‘Perhaps I should have let him kill the woman and then we could have dispatched the others as I wanted to do on the Plain of Pamir,’ Tegana replied, and reminded Marco that he had always claimed they were evil spirits who had brought only trouble to the caravan. Marco shook his head.

‘No, you are wrong. They are travellers as we are, but of another nature which I do not understand. Even so, I am responsible for their safety.’ Tegana snorted in disgust.

‘No,’ Marco protested, ‘I took their caravan from them and it is my duty to see them safely on their way home,’ Tegana patted the stallion’s rump.

‘Do you think they hold you in such esteem?’ he asked.

‘The Doctor, no, though with good reason. The others, yes.’

‘And which of them commands?’

‘The Doctor.’

‘And leaders are obeyed,’ Tegana emphasised and suggested that, with cunning, Susan had won Ping-Cho from Marco’s side.

‘She’s a child, Tegana,’ Marco said with a smile.

‘Be warned. Only a fool defends his enemies,’ Tegana retorted. As they

walked from the stables towards the main courtyard Tegana argued that the Doctor and his followers would set them at one another's throats and, when the caravan was divided, they would be destroyed one by one.

'They are harmless, Tegana,' Marco insisted as they entered the courtyard.

'Harmless,' Tegana echoed the word and pointed to the TARDIS, 'when they possess a caravan that flies.'

'What power they have is locked inside and I hold the key.' Tegana stopped Marco with his hand and leant closer to him.

'Last night, Marco, when you and I and the man, Ian, were scouring Tun-Huang for the woman, Chenchu thought the old man was in his room but it was not so,'

Tegana hissed conspiratorially. 'He was out here with his caravan.' Marco was taken aback.

'What exactly are you saying, Tegana?'

'Does a magician need a key to open a door?' Then Tegana walked into the way-station leaving Marco staring at the TARDIS.

They were eating breakfast when Barbara came downstairs.

The men stood up as she approached the table and Ian pulled out her chair.

'How do you feel, my dear?' The Doctor solicitously asked the question that was on everyone's mind with the exception of Tegana who wondered what she knew.

Barbara smiled at the Doctor as she sat down.

'Still a bit shaky, Doctor,' she replied.

'You are most fortunate to be alive, and had it not been for Tegana...' Marco left the rest of the sentence unspoken.

'Yes, I know, and I am grateful to the War Lord,' she said looking into Tegana's dark, expressionless eyes. A servant came and took her order. Marco stared fixedly at his plate.

'What possessed you to go to the cave?' he asked. 'You know my rule

about obtaining permission to leave here, particularly at night.' Barbara hesitated before replying.

'I wanted to see it,' she lied, 'and I knew you wouldn't've let me go.'

'Certainly, not alone,' Marco replied.

'If you'd asked, I'd've gone with you,' Ian said. Marco looked directly at Barbara.

'How did you find it?' Barbara was flustered for a moment and then said that when Marco had first mentioned the cave he had indicated where it was. Marco shook his head.

'No, I didn't,' he said flatly. Barbara put her elbow on the table and rested her forehead in her hand as Ian repeated Marco's question.

'I followed someone.'

'Who just happened to be going there.' Marco's voice was full of disbelief. 'Now tell the truth.'

'I've told you, I followed someone.'

'Who?' Marco insisted. Barbara looked at them one by one and finally her eyes rested on Tegana.

'The War Lord Tegana,' she spoke softly but everyone heard. Tegana leapt to his feet.

'Me!' he cried fiercely. 'I have been to the cave but once and you were there when I arrived.'

'That's not true,' Barbara protested, 'I followed you.'

Tegana eyed her coldly and reiterated that he had only been there once.

'Why would I lie?' Barbara reasoned. 'I was almost killed.' Tegana turned to Marco.

'Mark well all I have told you, my friend,' he said and strode from the room onto the courtyard.

The servant brought Barbara's breakfast and placed it in front of her. As she smiled her thanks, Marco stood up, excused himself from the table saying he had things to do and went upstairs to his room. For a

moment there was silence which was broken when Ian suggested that Barbara should start to eat. She looked around the table.

'You believe me, don't you?' She sounded tentative.

'Of all the silly questions,' the Doctor replied with a smile. 'Eat.' Barbara picked up her chopsticks as Susan leant confidentially across the table.

'I have a theory about the War Lord Tegana,' she murmured and then explained it. The Doctor glanced uncomfortably at Ping-Cho which vexed Susan. 'Oh, grandfather, I'd trust Ping-Cho with my life.'

'So would I,' Barbara said and, agreeing with Susan's theory, took it one stage further. 'He must've been in the second chamber when I was taken prisoner and he obviously knew what would happen to me, yet he did nothing about it until, as Susan's said, he had to for his own ends.'

'The trouble is, my dear, we have no proof,' the Doctor admitted, 'none whatsoever.' Ian fiddled with the chopsticks on his plate.

'Frankly, Doctor, the sooner we take a powder the better,' he said.

'Have your glasses of water ready in a few days time,' the Doctor replied. Ping-Cho looked at Susan with a puzzled expression and then, realising what Ian had meant, lowered her eyes.

The day was spent preparing the caravan for the next leg of their journey. Lan-Chow lay two hundred leagues to the south-west and their route would take them across the foothills of the Nan Shan mountain range, through the old cities of Su-Chow and Khan-Chow where the Great Wall of Cathay began. In all, Marco calculated that they would be travelling for thirty to forty days before reaching their destination which stood on the banks of the Hwang Ho, or Yellow River.

'I am re-arranging the accommodation for the journey,'

Marco announced in the evening and looked at Susan.

'You will share Barbara's quarters so that Ping-Cho may be alone.' Both of them were shocked.

'Oh, why, Messer Marco?' Ping-Cho wailed. Marco cleared his throat.

‘We are entering Cathay,’ he said, ‘and you are the Lady Ping-Cho from an illustrious family in Samarkand, on your way to be wed at the Khan’s court to one of his most distinguished advisers. It must be seen by those we may encounter whilst travelling that you are being treated according to your exalted station in life.’ Ping-Cho ran up the stairs to their room and Susan followed her. Barbara raised her eyebrows at Marco.

‘You can’t mean that,’ she said, half-smiling.

‘I would not have said it if I had not meant it,’ he replied.

‘Stop being pompous. They enjoy each other’s company so much.’

‘A familiarity I should never have permitted.’

‘I doubt you could have prevented it,’ Ian added and the Doctor silently agreed with Ian’s earlier opinion that the sooner they were on their way the better.

Upstairs, Ping-Cho sat miserably on the edge of her bed while Susan tried to comfort her, saying that it wouldn’t be so difficult as they would share a horse all day, venturing off into the foothills, eating their meals together, and Barbara wouldn’t say a word if she crept into Ping-Cho’s compartment for a whispered midnight conversation.

But that was not the way it turned out to be. When Ping-Cho came onto the courtyard in the morning, a horse had been saddled for her and, with it, a Mongol bearer to hold the reins and walk alongside. Susan was given another horse and the Doctor sat in the lead wagon with the Mongol driver whilst Barbara and Ian, on horseback, kept him company on either side. Marco and Tegana would ride off into the foothills in search of pheasants, quails, hares and wild boars to supplement their evening meals.

Though the atmosphere among them was tense, the progress was good and on the ninth evening they pitched camp within sight of Su-Chow. During their evening meal, the Doctor made several mental calculations. The way-station at Su-Chow was no more than half a day’s travel away which would give them ample time to take a bath, have their clothes cleaned, and dine at leisure. When all was quiet, he would slip into the TARDIS to refit the verified circuits of the microswitches, then gather his team together and take leave of this vexacious Venetian and his uncouth barbaric companion, although he did feel a brief pang of remorse about separating Ping-Cho and Susan.

After dinner he challenged Marco to a game of chess and, to everyone's astonishment, allowed himself to be beaten on the thirty-fifth move.

'Shah mat,' Marco cried in triumph. The Doctor studied the board.

'Why, so it is,' he said blithely and congratulated Marco on his decisive victory. 'You'll grant me my revenge tomorrow evening at the way-station?' he requested.

'Whenever you like, Doctor,' Marco replied, 'but we're not staying at Su-Chow. Our next stop will be at Kan-Chow in ten days time. Shall we wait until then?'

'As you please,' the Doctor mumbled, realising that their quick escape was no longer possible and regretting he had thrown away an easy victory on the thirtieth move.

Beyond Su-Chow they travelled across undulating prairies which stretched away northwards and, to the south, the Nan Shan mountain range with its snowcapped peaks still dominated the horizon. The weather was temperate, the caravan maintained an average of five leagues a day and, as they journeyed on, Marco relieved much of the tension by allowing Ping-Cho and Susan to spend more time together.

For his part, the Doctor contained his impatience as best he could which did not go unobserved by Ian and Barbara who realised what should have happened at Su-Chow.

On the fifth day they encountered a merchant caravan travelling in the opposite direction. Courtesies were exchanged and questions put about the possibility of other caravans along the route. The merchant, a bumptious, overweight, middle-aged man from Kan-Chow, reported that since leaving Kan-Chow he had only seen a group of Tartar horsemen riding towards the city. He admitted that he was alarmed at their approach, believing them to be bandits which, by their appearance, they could have been, their leader having a vivid scar down one side of his face.

But they rode on leaving the caravan in peace. Tegana was intrigued to learn that Acomat must have overtaken them at night and would be waiting for him in Kan-Chow.

Barbara was the first to see it on the eighth day of their journey. They were travelling through a valley towards Kan-Chow when she saw in the distance a grey line which snaked up and over the hills. She

pointed to it excitedly.

‘Look, Ian, it’s the Great Wall of Chi - Cathay,’ she corrected herself with a glance at Marco.

‘Good for a two thousand mile stroll along the top,’ Ian replied.

‘It was built three hundred years before the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ,’ Marco added.

‘And do you know why it was built?’ Tegana demanded, punching himself on the chest. ‘To keep War Lords, Tartars like me out of Cathay.’ He roared with laughter. It occurred to the Doctor that, after all, Tegana had a vestige of humour in him.

By noon on the tenth day they were installed in the way-station at Kan-Chow under the shadow of the Great Wall and, after Ian had bathed and changed his clothes, he knocked on the Doctor’s door. He was invited in, sat down in a chair and then the Doctor began juggling with the microswitches.

‘Been like that since Su-Chow,’ Ian remarked as the Doctor sent five of them flying into the air to be deftly caught, one by one, in his mandarin’s hat.

‘By this time tomorrow, Chesterton, we shall be elsewhere,’ the Doctor prophesied. Ian thought about the prospect for a moment.

‘I won’t be sorry but there will be all those loose threads left dangling,’ he replied. ‘What happens to Marco, Ping-Cho and Tegana?’

‘My dear fellow, we know what happens to Polo. He almost reaches home but gets captured by the Genoese and chucked in the clink which serves him right after the way he’s treated us.’ The Doctor dusted his hands dismissively.

‘Ping-Cho will no doubt marry her civil servant and as for Tegana, with all due respect, I can only wish for the worst.’

Ian volunteered to let Barbara and Susan know that they were under starter’s orders.

‘Be careful what you say to Susan,’ the Doctor cautioned, ‘particularly if Ping-Cho is around. That Chinese child makes me nervous.’ Ian was surprised.

‘Good Lord, Doctor, why?’

‘She knows I have a duplicate key,’ he replied and told Ian about the incident on the courtyard at Tun-Huang.

‘When I came out of the TARDIS the pair of them were standing there,’ he concluded. Ian smiled.

‘Doctor, the least of our worries is Ping-Cho.’

9

Too Many Kan-Chow Cooks

Ian’s conjecture about Ping-Cho was more accurate than the Doctor’s prophecy and the only person concerned about her was Susan as they sat in her room.

‘Will you be leaving tonight?’ Ping-Cho asked.

‘Possibly,’ Susan replied.

‘I want you to know that this journey has been the happiest time of my life, in spite of all the dangers and Messer Marco’s odd behaviour after Tun-Huang.’

‘I keep wondering what Tegana said to him.’

‘I’ve asked Messer Marco a hundred times but he remains silent.’ Ping-Cho looked earnestly at Susan, ‘You will say goodbye, won’t you?’

‘Of course.’

‘No matter how late it is.’

‘I promise. My room’s just along the passageway and I must pass yours to go downstairs.’ Ping-Cho looked perplexed. Susan smiled and rapped on the bedside table with her knuckles. ‘I’ll knock on the door.’ Suddenly Ping-Cho’s face lit up.

‘He’s a liar, Susan, he’s a liar and we can prove it. Come on.’ She grabbed Susan by the hand and ran down the corridor to Marco’s room, tapped cursorily on the door and, without waiting for a reply, dragged Susan inside.

Marco was sitting at the table, writing up his journal.

‘He’s a liar and we’ve the proof, Messer Marco,’ Ping-Cho blurted. Marco put down his quill pen and looked at them with a smile.

‘Who’s a liar?’ he asked. Ping-Cho glanced at Susan and swallowed.

‘The War Lord Tegana.’ Marco frowned.

‘That’s a serious charge, young lady,’ he warned.

‘But we have the proof, Messer Marco,’ Ping-Cho insisted. Marco studied the unfinished page of his journal for a moment.

‘All right,’ he said finally, folding his arms, ‘tell me.’

‘Do you remember the War Lord’s reply when the Lady Barbara said she had followed him to the Cave of Five Hundred Eyes?’

‘Yes. He said he’d never been there before.’

‘That was the lie, Messer Marco. When the War Lord came into the cave Susan’s grandfather showed him the Lady Barbara’s handkerchief saying we had found it over there, pointing to a dark corner and Tegana asked if we had explored the passageway.’

‘Well?’ Marco asked.

‘If he had never been in the cave before, how could he have known that the corner was a passageway?’

‘That’s right, Ping-Cho, and grandfather will agree as well,’ Susan was emphatic but Marco shook his head.

‘I won’t put the question to the Doctor,’ he said and explained that most travellers knew about the cave but only a few, of whom he was one, knew about the inner chamber. ‘No, this is not proof that the War Lord Tegana is a liar. Believe me, it will take much more than that to shake my confidence in him.’ He picked up his quill, dipped it in the ink and continued writing his journal.

At their dinner the Doctor was affable, almost jovial, Ian thought, as he bantered with everyone around the table, rotating the dumb-waiter and selecting a delicacy to place on Barbara’s, Susan’s or Ping-Cho’s plate, observing that Kan-Chow was renowned throughout Cathay for its cooking. Marco agreed but expressed his surprise that the Doctor knew it.

‘My dear Polo, I know a few facts about Cathay,’ the Doctor replied

lightheartedly. ‘For example, one should always have one’s tailor in Han-Chow where the finest silks are spun and woven, and it is considered bad form to die other than at Lu-Chow where the best wood for coffins is to be found.’ Everyone laughed and Marco admitted that he knew both cities and the Doctor was right.

Afterwards they drank tea in the lounge while Marco spoke about the next leg of their journey. Grinning at the Doctor, he conceded that Lan-Chow was not as distinguished as Kan-Chow, Han-Chow or Lu-Chow but nonetheless it was important as the first city on the banks of the Hwang Ho, or Yellow River, on its thousand league course to the sea. Marco estimated it would take them a week to reach Lan-Chow. ‘No, for *you* to reach it,’ the Doctor mentally corrected him with a sly smile.

Tegana stood up, stretched, and announced he was going to take the night air before sleeping. Neither Ping-Cho nor Susan believed him as he walked_out nto the courtyard. Ian leant over to Barbara.

‘Following him, are you?’ he whispered.

‘Not on my life,’ she replied emphatically.

Susan and Ping-Cho then said they were going to their rooms and one by one they bade the others goodnight.

Susan left the Doctor to the last.

‘Goodnight, grandfather,’ she said and kissed him on the cheek.

‘Sleep well, my child, and may your dreams transport you to wondrous places,’ he replied, with a hint of a wink.

When the girls reached Ping-Cho’s door, she looked at Susan.

‘And they will, won’t they?’ Susan nodded. Ping-Cho tapped gently on her door. ‘You won’t forget?’

‘No, I won’t forget,’ Susan replied and went to her room where her own clothes, all crisp and clean, were hanging.

She sighed, then changed into them and sat on the edge of the bed to wait.

Tegana knew where to find Acomat because, before he started his journey to the Khan’s summer palace, meeting-places in every city had

been arranged. He told him that he knew they had passed the caravan one night which made Acomat laugh.

'Between Tun-Huang and here we could have attacked you twenty times,' he boasted, 'but you did not signal.'

'In open country there would have been no place to hide the bodies,' Tegana replied. 'In the desert the winds and the singing sands would have concealed them, as will the bamboo forests we shall soon approach along a tributary of the Hwang Ho. They are dense, almost impenetrable, and we must pitch our tents on the edge of one for a night before we reach Lan-Chow. Watch for us and I shall signal to you like this.' He strode over to the fire burning in the hearth and snatched a branch of wood from it which he waved above his head. 'Then with stealth attack and we shall slaughter them, hiding their carcasses in the depths of the forest. Take the flying caravan to the great Khan Noghai while I ride on to Shang-Tu and fulfil my mission.'

'How does one enter this caravan, my lord?' Acomat asked.

'There is a key which Polo has but I shall retain it until I return to Karakorum and proclaim the great Khan Noghai as Master of the World.'

In his room the Doctor changed into his own clothes, putting the omni-electrometer into one pocket of his jacket and the microswitches into the other. He waited until all was quiet before he peered cautiously along the corridor.

No one was in sight, all in their rooms, he thought. Swiftly and silently he went down the stairs and out onto the courtyard.

For a moment he stood in front of the TARDIS and tapped his pocket which contained the microswitches.

Wondrous places, he thought with a smile, then clambered onto the wagon, unlocked the door and went inside. But he had made one miscalculation. They were not all in their rooms. The War Lord Tegana, returning after taking the night air, was watching him from the entrance to the way-station and as soon as the Doctor had closed the door behind him, Tegana hurried to Marco's room. Without bothering to knock, he entered.

'The old magician is in the caravan,' he proclaimed to a startled Marco, 'I saw him enter.' Marco shook the sleep from his head.

‘Go back quickly and keep guard in case he comes out.

If he does, hold him there,’ he replied. Tegana smiled and left the room as Marco threw on his clothes, drew his sword and burst into Ian’s room. Ian was reclining fully dressed on the bed.

‘Get up,’ Marco ordered, ‘fetch Miss Wright and the girl. Bring them to the courtyard immediately.’ Ian did his best to appear nonchalant, shrugging as if he didn’t know what was happening but inwardly realising that something had gone very wrong. He did as he was told, collected Barbara and Susan and the three of them went onto the courtyard where Tegana and Marco stood in front of the wagon.

‘What’s all this about?’ Ian bluffed. Marco pointed his sword at the ship.

‘The Doctor, as you call him, is in there.’ His voice was glacial.

‘Have you checked his room,’ Ian asked innocently.

‘Do you take me for an idiot?’ Marco replied. ‘We’ll wait here until he comes out, even if we stay all night.’

Inside the TARDIS the Doctor spent a busy hour putting the microswitches back in place and checking the circuits one by one with the exception of two: the blue lamp on top which might draw attention, and the dematerialisation circuit in case he couldn’t get back. But everything would work, he knew it, as he rubbed his hands together and went outside.

‘Lock the door,’ Ian shouted. The Doctor fumbled for the key in his pocket, found it, did as he was instructed and turned defiantly to face Marco and Tegana. Marco held out his hand.

‘I’ll take the key,’ he said.

‘No.’ The Doctor was adamant. Tegana leapt onto the wagon and raised his sword.

‘You’re an old man, Doctor,’ Marco said, ‘and I do not wish to use force.’ The Doctor glared at him.

‘It’s what you’ll need to use, Polo.’

‘Shall I cut it off?’ Tegana asked, his sword poised above the Doctor’s hand.

‘Grandfather, give it to him, give it,’ Susan screamed.

The Doctor opened his hand and held out the key.

‘Did I not say he had another?’ Tegana proclaimed as the Doctor clambered down from the wagon and waved the key in front of Marco’s face.

‘Put that key in the lock and you’ll destroy the caravan, Polo,’ he warned, ‘and then where will you and your precious Kublai Khan be?’ Marco snatched the key from the Doctor’s hand. ‘You need more than a key, Polo, you need knowledge,’ - the Doctor tapped the side of his head with his forefinger - ‘knowledge you’ll never possess.’

‘Give me that knowledge.’

‘It’s beyond your comprehension, Polo.’

‘The Doctor’s right, Marco,’ Ian interjected.

‘We’re here, the four of us,’ Barbara added, ‘and the ship is repaired, so why not let us leave you?’

‘In peace,’ the Doctor snapped. Susan thought about Ping-Cho and bit her lower lip.

‘No,’ Marco retorted and turned to Tegana. ‘Bear me witness. I wear the gold seal of mighty Kublai Khan and by the authority it invests in me, I do hereby seize and hold your flying caravan.’ He pointed his sword at each of them in turn. ‘Be warned, any resistance to this decree is instantly punishable by death. Now, return to your rooms.’

The Doctor looked at Marco and shook his head sadly.

‘Oh, you poor, misguided, stupid, pathetic savage,’ he said and walked back into the way-station.

10

Bamboozled

The journey became a nightmare. In the morning they discovered that Marco had segregated them, taken away their horses, thereby making them travel together in a wagon, and eat and sleep in a guarded separate tent. Ping-Cho was not allowed to associate with any of them which made her resent Marco who, as they travelled on, struggled to fight off his pangs of conscience. But the arrangements suited Tegana

perfectly. The caravan was divided which would make his and Acomat's task much easier when they reached the bamboo forests where he would despatch Marco whilst Acomat and the Tartars slaughtered the others and Ping-Cho.

On the third day of the journey as they sat in the wagon Ian gave vent to the sentiment the four of them felt.

'It's pointless continuing like this,' he said, 'we must make a bid for freedom.' The Doctor nodded.

'That's more easily said than done, Ian,' Barbara warned.

'I know the odds are against us,' he replied, 'but we must try.'

'Yes, Chesterton, I agree with you,' the Doctor added.

'My ship is sitting there waiting for us.'

'But Marco has both keys,' Susan reminded them.

'We must recover one of them,' Ian said. 'But how?'

'Capture Polo,' the Doctor remarked.

'Why not?' Ian asked. 'Take him hostage.' Barbara shook her head.

'We're hopelessly outnumbered, Ian.' He smiled at her.

'During the day, yes. But not at night. Then there's only the guard.'

'Armed,' Susan observed. Ian raised his hand.

'It'll be up to me to change that.'

'And Tegana?' Barbara asked.

'Since we've all been lumped in one tent, Marco sleeps in his own quarters which has an outside flap, so the War Lord has the main section of their tent to himself.' Ian grinned. 'I'll do my best not to disturb his slumbers.'

'Fully aware that you are perfectly capable of this enterprise, Chesterton, I have only one question to put to you,' the Doctor said. 'When?'

Ian glanced at them one by one. 'Tonight.'

The Doctor turned to Susan. ‘I’m sorry, my dear, but I must insist, not one murmur of this venture to Ping-Cho.’

Susan shrugged.

‘Marco has forbidden us to speak to one another, grandfather.’

It was late afternoon when the caravan stopped on the edge of a bamboo forest. The tents were pitched and a campfire lit using wood the Mongol bearers had collected during the day’s travel as bamboo was unsuitable for a fire. Barbara and Susan prepared a meal for the Doctor, Ian and themselves while Ping-Cho cooked for Marco and Tegana.

It was all so awkward and formal that Ping-Cho and Susan didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. But on one occasion when Marco wasn’t watching them closely, Ping-Cho put her right hand in front of her chest and discreetly waved her fingers up and down. Susan did the same and they both understood.

Later, the Doctor, Susan, Barbara and Ian were sealed in their tent and the armed guard posted in front of the flap.

‘Shall we sing a song?’ Ian asked, holding up a porcelain plate. ‘A rousing, noisy one.’

‘How about Loch Lomond?’ Barbara suggested.

‘I know that one,’ the Doctor said, remarking that it was a shame they didn’t have any bagpipes as an accompaniment. Taking Ian’s cue, they burst into song, falteringly at first but when they came to the chorus they were in unison and full voice.

‘Oh, ye’ll tak’ the high road and I’ll tak’ the low road, And I’ll be in Scotland afore ye,

But me and my true love will never meet again On the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Looooomond.’

As they roared out the last word, Ian snapped the plate in two.

Marco stood with Ping-Cho outside the tent and shook his head in bewilderment. In all his journeys he had never met such travellers and he knew he was treating them badly. He liked them, he enjoyed their company but he wanted to return to Venice and the gift of the flying caravan to the Khan was the way to achieve it. He turned away and

walked back to the main tent. Ping-Cho stared at the flap and repeated her little wave with tears welling in her eyes.

After midnight Ian put his plan into operation. He slit open the back of the tent with the edge of the broken plate and crawled out.

Still crouching, he looked around cautiously. The guard was facing the bamboo forest and leaning with his back against a wagon. Ian crept towards him, knowing he would be difficult to overpower silently as he had to attack from the side which, unless he was very quick, would give the Mongol time to shout an alarm. Ian reached the end of the wagon and steeled himself to spring out. Then he stopped, looked around sharply and went back into cover. The guard was dead with an arrow sticking out of his chest. Ian returned to the tent, undid the flap and told them.

'Bandits, Chesterton,' the Doctor said. 'Inform Polo.'

The three of them understood the Doctor's implication.

'Yes, Doctor,' Ian replied and left the tent. Then he saw Tegana crouched over the dying fire, putting sticks on it.

Ian returned to the tent.

'Tegana's by the fire.'

'Try to by-pass him without being seen,' the Doctor said, 'Polo's the one to be told.'

Tegana was pre-occupied with the fire so it was not difficult for Ian to skirt around him and reach the open flap of Marco's quarters. He went inside and shook Marco's shoulder.

'Marco, wake up,' he whispered urgently. Marco stirred.

'The guard's been killed. I think we're in for an attack by bandits.' Marco scrambled to his feet, grabbed his sword and went into the main section of the tent.

'Where's Tegana?'

'Outside, tending the fire. We thought it wiser to inform you first.' Marco rushed out just as Tegana picked up a burning brand.

'Tegana,' he hissed, 'bandits.' Tegana threw the stick back onto the fire. 'Wake the bearers. Arm yourself. Ian, ask the Doctor to escort

Susan and Barbara to my tent and put them with Ping-Cho.' When Ian returned Marco handed him a sword. 'Do you know how to use one?'

'Not the way you mean,' Ian replied with a smile, 'but given half a chance I'll learn.' The Doctor came out of the main tent.

'What's the plan of battle, Polo?' he asked.

'We defend ourselves as best we can,' Marco said and handed the Doctor a sword.

'We are bound to be outnumbered. What's needed here is strategy,' the Doctor retorted.

'If you are as aggressive with a sword as you are with your tongue we cannot lose,' Marco said. The Doctor shook his head.

'It's not enough.' The Doctor placed the tip of the blade on the ground and rested his hands on the hilt. 'Definitely not enough. No, we must, we must...' - a devious smile spread across his face - 'bamboozle them.'

'I don't understand,' Marco admitted.

'Perhaps a word unfamiliar to your ears, which means to outwit or to deceive.' The Doctor looked at Ian.

'Chesterton, help me to hack down some of those bamboos.

You as well, Polo,' he ordered. 'And you. too,' he added, looking at Tegana.

The four of them went to the edge of the forest and began slashing down the bamboo stalks.

'What is this about, Doctor?' Marco asked.

'We are about to build a better bonfire,' the Doctor replied.

From the depths of the forest Acomat waited impatiently for Tegana's signal. He could see the campfire burning but nothing else. He turned to the Tartar at his side.

'What keeps him?' he growled.

'Perhaps the War Lord sleeps,' the Tartar replied.

'True. Tegana is not as young as we are. Alert the others. We shall

wake him up.'

The Doctor was heaping bamboo stalks onto the fire as Marco came over to him with some more.

'Is Tegana right?' he asked, 'are you a magician?' The Doctor was amused.

'I would have thought you knew about bamboo, Polo. It has compartments in it full of air and as they heat up the air expands until the stalk explodes. Not unlike a Cathay fire-cracker,' he added for good measure. Then they heard the shouts from within the forest as Acomat and the Tartars came noisily towards the camp.

'Defend yourselves,' Marco shouted and they all faced the forest.

Tegana was inwardly fuming with rage. He had told Acomat to attack with stealth and he had been disobeyed, his plan had failed. Now Acomat must pay the price. The Tartars swarmed from the forest with Acomat at their head.

'So the Master of the World's War Lord, Tegana, is awake,' he cried just before Tegana cut him down. Then, the bonfire began to explode as Marco, Ian and the Doctor, shouting 'be off with you', and the bearers counter-attacked. Acomat's followers took to their heels and fled back into the forest.

Barbara came to the entrance of the main tent.

'Are you all right?' she asked anxiously.

'We set the knaves scuttering, my dear,' the Doctor replied, waving his sword dramatically in the air.

'And the explosions?' Ian pointed to the fire and explained the Doctor's use of the bamboo.

'The bandits thought there were devils in the fire,'

Marco added.

'No, Polo, more than that. They ran because the War Lord slew their leader. That's what broke them.' He glanced at the two bearers who were carrying away Acomat's body. Tegana swaggered over to the Doctor.

'In battle all men face death,' he proclaimed. The Doctor looked at

him evenly.

‘True, but few expect to meet it,’ he replied. Tegana turned away and walked past Barbara into the tent. Marco glanced from Ian to the Doctor.

‘Were you attempting to escape?’ he asked.

‘No, Polo, we were escaping.’ The Doctor nonchalantly stuck his sword into the ground. Ian explained their plan and remarked that the Doctor had insisted Marco be warned. Marco inclined his head to the Doctor.

‘I thank you for our lives, Doctor,’ he said half-smiling,

‘but out of prudence for the future, it would be preferable if the guard were on my tent rather than yours.’

‘We are no longer prisoners,’ Ian stated.

‘No.’

The Doctor held out his hand. ‘Then give me the key and we shall journey on.’

Marco sighed. ‘I wish I could make you realise how important your flying caravan is to me.’ The Doctor bristled.

‘Better you realised how infinitely more important it is to us,’ he snapped and stomped into their tent.

11

Rider from Shang-Tu

At sunrise they broke camp and travelled beyond the bamboo forests onto the plain leading to Lan-Chow and the river. But at midday Marco halted the caravan at a small inn near a village and announced that they would stay there until the following morning to recover from the events of the previous night. The inn was not as well-appointed as a way-station but it was adequate and the food, though simple, was good. The landlord said he was honoured to have such distinguished guests and did his best to make them comfortable. Marco had lifted his strictures, Ping-Cho and Susan were sharing a room again, and the atmosphere at the table was relaxed. When they had eaten and were sipping their tea, Marco looked at each of them in turn.

‘Will you, on your honour, promise not to attempt another escape?’ he asked. The question was received with a stubborn silence. Marco sighed and put his hands, palms down, on the table. ‘So be it,’ he muttered.

‘We sacrificed our bid for freedom to save you, Polo,’

the Doctor retorted.

‘I know you did,’ Marco said, ‘and in return I revoke, by official decree, the seizure of your flying caravan.’

‘Noble of you, I’m sure,’ the Doctor replied tartly, ‘now hand over the keys.’ Marco shook his head.

‘No, Doctor, we’ve been through this before.’

Tegana pointed a warning finger at Marco. ‘Whatever you grant them, they will use against you.’

Marco chuckled. ‘I shall be guarded day and night.’

Tegana stood up. ‘Let me be your sword. I shall protect

-’

‘No.’ Marco cut him off sharply. ‘You are in my charge, not I in yours.’ They were two remarks that intrigued the Doctor and to which he referred later when the four of them were alone.

‘Tegana realises that the jig is up as far as we’re concerned.’

‘He knows we’re on to him,’ Ian agreed.

‘But on to what?’ Barbara asked. The Doctor leant forward in his chair.

‘That, young woman, is the pertinent question. Ian saw the War Lord tending the campfire last night. A menial task, one he’d order the guard to do.’

‘But the guard was dead, grandfather,’ Susan said.

‘Precisely, dear child,’ the Doctor replied, ‘and Tegana sounded no alarm. *Ergo*, he knew.’

‘You’re suggesting he was implicated in the attack,’ Ian observed.

‘I’m stating a fact, Chesterton,’ the Doctor replied.

‘Since we became involved with Polo’s caravan, two men have died and Tegana slew them both. He knew them both, I’ve no doubt, the one in the forest called him by name, but his ultimate mission is more important than their lives.’

‘But what is it?’ Barbara asked.

‘Nice lady, that I do not know and, what is more, I do not care. I want that key and us away from here.’

Suddenly, they heard the sound of jingling bells approaching.

‘It’s not Christmas, is it?’ Susan joked and then a young man with a bandeau around his head and wearing close-fitting breeches tucked into his riding boots, and a shirt with a wide belt ringed with bells tightened around his waist, strode in from the courtyard.

‘I seek Messer Marco Polo,’ he said. Susan stood up.

‘He’s in his room, I’ll fetch him.’ She ran up the stairs.

Ian was staring at the bells.

‘Why do you wear those?’ he asked finally.

‘To let people know that I approach,’ the young man replied with a smile and explained that he was a special courier to Kublai Khan. ‘I ride without respite to my destination, apart from the moment to change my horse every league. The bells warn the inn-keeper to saddle up a fresh steed for me.’

‘Where have you come from?’ the Doctor asked.

‘The summer palace at Shang-Tu.’

‘That’s a hundred leagues from here,’ Ian exclaimed.

‘When did you leave?’

‘Yesterday.’

‘I would have thought it physically impossible,’ Barbara said.

‘My clothing, as you see, is very tight, my lady, or else we would be shaken to pieces.’

‘Are there many like you who can cover such distances without rest?’ Ian asked. The young man waved a hand in front of his face.

‘We are few, my lord, but it’s in our blood. All of us come from the great steppes to the north.’

The Doctor suggested that as he had reached his destination he should sit down. The young man smiled.

‘Thank you, my lord,’ he replied, eased out his belt, sat in a chair and stretched his legs.

Susan was about to rap on Marco’s door when she thought it would be better if Ping-Cho told him of the young man’s arrival, so she went to their room and asked her to do the errand. Ping-Cho guessed instantly where the courier had come from, rushed over to Marco’s room, knocked briefly on the door and, without waiting for a reply, went inside.

Marco was at the table putting the two keys in a compartment at the back of his journal. He looked angrily at Ping-Cho who apologised for bursting in and explained that one of the Khan’s special couriers was downstairs.

Marco closed his journal and looked at her.

‘Do I have your word not to tell anyone where the keys are?’

‘Yes, Messer Marco, you do. No one at all.’

Followed by Ping-Cho and Susan, Marco went downstairs and the young man jumped to his feet, then bowed.

‘Ling-Tau,’ Marco said with pleasure and asked him what was the great Khan’s bidding. Ling-Tau opened the despatch pouch that was part of his belt and handed Marco a sealed parchment document which he opened and read.

He looked around at the others.

‘Kublai Khan wishes to see me without delay,’ he said, tapping the parchment.

‘Give me the keys, one will do, jump on your horse and gallop away,’ the Doctor replied. Even Marco could not resist a grin.

‘No, Doctor, Lan-Chow is a day’s travel from here. We shall go there

tomorrow, take horses and ride to the summer palace at Shang-Tu. All in all, eight days to cover the distance,' he concluded.

'What about my personal effects?' the Doctor glowered at him.

'They will follow on with a commercial caravan,' Marco replied. 'There is at least one every day that leaves Lan-Chow for Shang-Tu.'

'Polo, we are talking about my ship,' the Doctor snapped back, 'and I'm not letting it out of my sight.'

Marco held up the Khan's seal.

'This says your flying caravan will arrive without incident at the summer palace. On Kublai Khan's oath.'

The Doctor snorted as Marco turned to Ling-Tau.

'I shall prepare a reply for the great Khan which you will carry to him tomorrow when we leave here.' Ling-Tau pulled off his bandeau and undid his belt.

'Thank you, Messer Marco,' he said with a smile. Ian looked at him in astonishment.

'Do you mean you'd have ridden back to Shang-Tu immediately?'

'If it were necessary, my lord,' Ling-Tau replied, pushing his shoulders back and stretching. Ping-Cho thought he was a very handsome young man.

The next morning Ling-Tau galloped away with Marco's reply in his belt of jingling bells while the caravan trundled sedately towards Lan-Chow. At noon they could see the spires of the city and by mid-afternoon, the river shimmering in the sunlight and snaking away to the horizon. Just before dusk they arrived at the way-station where they were greeted by the rotund and pompous manager, Wang-Lo. As usual, the Doctor had the TARDIS

placed in the central courtyard, this time beneath a trelliswork of hanging gardens, before going up to his room to take a bath and change. When he came downstairs to join the others for dinner, the central courtyard contained only the hanging gardens.

'Where's my ship, Polo? What have you done with it?'

he demanded. Marco looked perplexed.

‘I haven’t touched it, Doctor. Honestly.’

‘To what does the old lord refer?’ Wang-Lo asked haughtily.

‘His caravan,’ Marco replied, ‘it was out there.’ He pointed to the courtyard. Wang-Lo put the back of his right hand to his forehead.

‘Oh, that’s what it is. One had it removed to the stables.’

‘The stables!’ The Doctor exploded.

‘One could hardly leave it under the hanging gardens, now could one?’

‘Oh, yes, one could.’ The Doctor was acerbic. ‘What does one imagine it is, a bathing hut?’ Marco reminded him about the caravan being taken to Shang-Tu with a commercial convoy.

‘So you will need to accustom yourself to not seeing it for a while,’ he said.

The Doctor seethed inwardly as Marco turned to Wang-Lo and asked him when the next convoy left for Shang-Tu.

‘One departs tomorrow in the morning,’ Wang-Lo replied.

‘Does one?’ the Doctor replied, still smarting.

‘One knows one does, my lord.’ Wang-Lo sounded authoritative. The Doctor stormed out as Ping-Cho had an idea and went to the hanging gardens to think it over.

There was a fountain and a pool in the centre with lotus leaves floating on the surface under which goldfish ducked in and out. She sat on the edge of the pool watching them when Susan came over to her. Ping-Cho looked up, smiled and pointed to one of the fish.

‘That one is Wang-Lo,’ she said, ‘fat and pompous.’

‘There’s Marco,’ Susan observed, pointing to another, ‘a little solemn and look, that one has Ian’s energy,’ as one swam rapidly by.

‘Barbara’s independence.’ Ping-Cho pointed at one which was on its own. Another sped from under a lotus leaf to disappear under another. ‘You,’ Ping-Cho giggled.

‘There’s grandfather,’ said Susan, pointing to an elderly goldfish with

pride of place under the biggest lotus leaf.

‘Now, where are you?’ Susan asked, and then spotted a frilled goldfish. ‘There you are with the wedding veil,’ she exclaimed, and instantly regretted it. ‘Forgive me, Ping-Cho, I’m sorry.’ Ping-Cho touched her hand.

‘I miss Samarkand,’ she confessed, ‘I miss my home.’

Susan sat beside her. ‘Tell me about it.’

‘It’s a welcoming house that wants people to live in it.

There is a garden, rather like this one but not as elaborate but still very beautiful, and in the summer evenings the air is filled with a thousand scents as well as the soft, tiny sounds of humming birds’ wings. I used to watch them for hours as they hovered in front of the flowers drawing off the nectar.’ Ping-Cho looked back into the water. ‘I would like to be there now.’

‘I can understand. You make it sound lovely.’

‘And your home, Susan, is it so very far away?’

‘As far as a night star.’

‘But you can reach it from Venice?’

‘Not without the TARDIS.’

‘So, if Messer Marco gives your caravan to Kublai Khan, you will never see your home again.’

‘Never.’

Ping-Cho put one hand to her lips. ‘I gave him my word, Susan, I promised not to tell anyone where he hid the keys.’

‘And I promise no one will ask you,’ Susan replied with a smile.

Ping-Cho complained of feeling faint whilst they were at table and excused herself. Susan offered to help her to their room but Ping-Cho declined and insisted that Susan finish her meal. As soon as she was upstairs, Ping-Cho slipped into Marco’s room, opened his journal which was lying on the table and stole one of the keys from the compartment in the back. Then she went to their room, lay down on her bed and waited for Susan who came as soon as she had eaten.

Ping-Cho sat up.

‘How do you feel?’ Susan sounded anxious.

‘Fine. What did you have as the main dish?’

‘Chicken-fat braised carp. It was delicious and I’m sorry you missed it.’

‘So am I,’ Ping-Cho pouted, ‘but I had something to do and I have this to give you.’ She held out the key and Susan’s eyes widened in surprise.

‘But you promised Marco.’

‘Not to tell anyone where they were. I’ve kept my word.

You don’t know where this came from.’ Susan sat on the edge of the bed beside her.

‘Marco will be very angry,’ Susan warned. Ping-Cho smiled at her.

‘But one of us, at least, will be on her way home,’ she said wistfully and they hugged each other.

12

Runaway

After he had drunk his tea Marco went into Lan-Chow to make final arrangements for the caravan’s journey to Shang-Tu. At the same time Tegana went to the stables to make travel arrangements for the TARDIS with a shifty-eyed thin man named Kuiju who looked at it suspiciously.

‘What is it, my lord?’ he asked warily.

‘A War Lord’s tomb which I want,’ Tegana replied. ‘Can you have it taken?’ Kuiju bared his opium-stained teeth in a smile.

‘Are you prepared to pay a good price?’

‘How much?’

‘I want gold, not Kublai Khan’s paper money.’

‘You’ll have it.’

‘In advance.’ Kuiju rubbed his hands together.

‘Half of it, the rest when I collect the tomb. How much?’

‘One hundred golden pieces.’

‘So be it.’

Kuiju could hardly believe his good fortune. ‘When do I receive the first half, my lord?’

‘Tonight. For this must start its journey tomorrow. I shall give you instructions when we meet again.’

‘The street of the beggars at midnight,’ Kuiju suggested.

‘I shall be there.’

‘As I shall, my lord,’ Kuiju said and scurried off into the night. Tegana looked at the flying caravan and stroked his chin.

‘A War Lord’s tomb,’ he mused, ‘more than that. A Khan’s throne for Noghai.’

The Doctor’s wrath about his ship had been temporarily assuaged by the quality of the evening meal and when Susan knocked lightly on his door he called out gaily for whoever it was to enter. Ping-Cho was with her and closed the door behind them.

‘You are recovered, young lady,’ he observed, ‘that pleases me. How may I be of service to you both?’

‘It’s Ping-Cho who has been of service to us, grandfather,’ Susan replied. ‘Look.’ Ping-Cho opened her left hand and in the palm lay the key.

‘I shall not ask questions, sweet person, rather shall I express my everlasting gratitude.’ The Doctor took the key from her and put it in the pocket of his jacket which, having been cleaned, hung on the wall. ‘We shall wait until all is quiet before we take our leave,’ he said and, smiling at Ping-Cho, added that he would entrust them to notify Barbara and Ian. When they had left, the Doctor decided to allow himself the luxury of another small glass of the mellow white wine they had enjoyed with their meal. Shao Chiu was its name, he recalled, as he went downstairs, sat in the lounge and ordered one. He was rolling some appreciatively around his mouth and reflecting on

their adventures of the past weeks when Marco came in. The Doctor swallowed the wine.

'Join me in a glass, Polo?' he asked.

'Thank you, Doctor.' Marco pulled up a chair as the Doctor clicked his fingers for service and ordered the wine.

'The arrangements are satisfactorily made for the rest of the journey to Shang-Tu, Doctor,' Marco said.

'Knowing you, Polo, I do not doubt it.'

'Horses will be here for us at dawn and the bearers will see our wagons safely charged before returning to Su-Chow. We'll ride until midday, stop at a wayside inn for a meal and ride on until dusk.'

'No jingling bells, I trust.' Marco laughed.

'We won't be riding as hard as Ling-Tau.'

'An agreeable young man,' the Doctor observed and Marco reiterated that their journey would take them eight days. 'There'll be a few aches and pains at the end of that,'

the Doctor added lightly, thinking all the time that they'd be long since gone into another age and another galaxy when Marco reached the summer palace. Marco drained his glass and stood up.

'I must write up my journal, Doctor, so I'll bid you goodnight.'

'Useful thing, keeping a record of events, Polo.

Goodnight.' As Marco went up to his room, the Doctor took some more wine and began rolling it around his mouth.

They put their plan into operation after midnight when the way-station staff were asleep. They tip-toed out onto the courtyard and around to the stables. Ping-Cho was with them to wave goodbye, as she put it. The Doctor was vexed that there wasn't a guard on his ship.

'Anyone could steal it,' he said indignantly.

'Like us,' Ian murmured with a grin. The Doctor clambered up onto the wagon. Ping-Cho ran over to him and kissed the back of his hand.

'Goodbye, kind lord,' she whispered.

‘Farewell, gentle maiden,’ the Doctor replied, ‘and refuse to marry someone old enough to be my grandfather.’

Ping-Cho went to Barbara and Ian in turn to say goodbye, leaving Susan until the last. They embraced with tears in their eyes as the Doctor put the key into the lock.

‘For a moment I thought you were going with them.

Ping-Cho,’ Marco’s voice came out of the darkness. ‘No, Doctor, if you look into the gloom you will see that you are completely surrounded by my bearers, all of whom are armed as I am, and as Susan is not yet up there with you, it would be pointless trying to dash for freedom. So come down, please, and give me the key.’ The Doctor withdrew the key from the lock and Barbara and Ian helped him to the ground. He handed Marco the key without a word.

‘Yes, Doctor, you’re right, it is a useful thing." Marco said enigmatically as the Doctor walked back into the way-station.

At dawn the Doctor stood in front of the TARDIS looking up at it, when Marco and Tegana came over to him.

‘Your horse is saddled, Doctor, and we must start our journey,’ Marco spoke gently. The Doctor’s eyes were cold when he turned to face him.

‘Do I have your word as, I suppose, a gentleman, that my flying caravan, as you call it, will safely reach the Khan’s summer palace?’

‘On my oath,’ Marco replied, which Tegana thought was a huge joke knowing that Kuiju would come to collect it once they had ridden from Lan-Chow.

‘The wagon in the stable, my lord, I am here to take it,’

Kuiju handed Wang-Lo an official-looking document with wax seals and pointed to the relevant clauses.

‘One can read, fellow,’ Wang-Lo retorted, although secretly he was impressed by the seals. ‘Take it.’ Turning his back he went into the way-station.

During their midday meal at an inn, Marco broached the subject of the key.

‘How did you come by it?’ he asked the Doctor.

‘It was given to me,’ the Doctor replied, looking at him directly.

‘By whom?’ Ping-Cho opened her mouth to speak but Ian was quicker.

‘Me. I searched your room when you were in Lan-Chow last night and found it.’ Dismissing the subject, Ian turned to Barbara and asked her to pass him the red sauce.

‘You mean the Hoy Sien Jeung,’ Barbara smiled as she handed it to him. Marco said nothing.

They rode on for two days without incident except that Susan noticed Ping-Cho becoming more and more taciturn. She recognised the symptom of homesickness.

For his part, the Doctor spent his time dreaming of the hot bath he would wallow in to ease his saddle-weary bones when they stopped in the evening. Barbara and Ian enjoyed the countryside and the meandering river while Tegana looked with cynical amusement at the Great Wall which he estimated must have taken at least two centuries to build.

Marco would have preferred to force the pace but out of respect for the Doctor contented himself with their progress. However, two crises were building. The first was triggered by Barbara after dinner in a way-station when she insisted that Ian talk to Marco about returning the TARDIS to them.

‘It’s pointless,’ he said. ‘I’ve tried again and again.’ Just then Marco came into the lounge.

‘Ian wants to talk to you,’ she said and, adding that she was tired, went up to her room. Marco looked at Ian who remained silent.

‘What is it?’ he asked. Ian thought for a moment before replying with measured words.

‘You must give us back the Doctor’s flying caravan.’

Marco turned away in exasperation.

‘You know what it means to me. If I give it to Kublai Khan, he will let me go home to Venice.’

‘We want to go home, too. And without it, we can’t.’

‘I have promised to take you to Venice with me and see you safely on

your way home from there.'

'By boat. But we can't go by boat. We need the Doctor's caravan.' Marco looked at Ian for several seconds.

'Why, Ian?' he asked. 'Why?' Ian closed his eyes and when he opened them he knew he would tell the truth.

'My home is in England, Marco,' he said.

'You've said so before and I grant it's a long way. But the journey is not impossible. The Crusaders did it.' Ian took a deep breath.

'Marco, for me the Crusaders lived nearly seven hundred years ago.' For a moment, Marco looked puzzled and then shook his head.

'That's ridiculous, Ian. The Crusaders were in Accra less than twenty five years ago.' Ian looked at him in desperation.

'Don't you understand? We come from another time.'

'That's impossible.'

'The Doctor's caravan doesn't only cover distances. It crosses years, centuries.'

'Journeys into the past and into the future,' Marco said, smiling.

'Yes. I know it's hard to believe but it's true. I swear it.

Look at our clothes, listen to the way we talk. Everything's different.'

'I have never been to England but I have heard that the English are an eccentric race.' Marco took the gold chain with the Khan's seal from under his blouse. On it hung the two keys, one of which he held between his forefinger and thumb.

'Where did you find this?' he asked.

'In your room,' Ian replied.

'Whereabouts? Where had I hidden them? You must remember where you found one.' Marco circled Ian slowly.

'But you didn't find it, did you? It was given to one of you and you, Ian, lied to protect someone else, Ping-Cho obviously.' Ian remained silent as Marco held up the key.

‘It does not matter to me why you lied. What is important is the fact that you are capable of lying.’

‘So you don’t believe me when I say we come from another time.’ Marco shrugged and put the chain back inside his blouse.

‘If I did, Ian, I would give you the key,’ he said and went upstairs to his room.

The second crisis took place in the early hours of the morning when Susan was asleep. Ping-Cho slipped out of bed, dressed and tip-toed to the door.

‘Goodbye, Susan,’ she whispered and went down td the stables where she saddled up her horse and rode back towards Lan-Chow and, far beyond it, Samarkand.

Susan raised the alarm when she woke up and saw Ping-Cho’s empty bed. She ran to Marco’s door and knocked.

‘Who is it?’ Marco called.

‘It’s me, Susan, Messer Marco. Ping-Cho’s gone.’ The door opened and Marco, fully dressed, stood there.

‘Gone? Gone where, Susan?’ Susan swallowed before she replied.

‘Home, I think. To Samarkand.’

‘But that’s more than three hundred leagues away. She’ll never reach it.’ Marco hurried to the stables to confirm that Ping-Cho’s horse was not there. Susan woke Barbara and Ian.

‘Is it because of the key?’ Ian asked. Susan shook her head.

‘She’s homesick and she’s taken grandfather’s advice.’

‘About marrying,’ Barbara said. ‘I don’t blame her but it’s a dangerous thing to have done.’

When they were all downstairs, Marco said that as he was responsible for her safety, he would ride back to find her and told them to stay at the way-station until he returned.

Tegana remarked that his mission to Kublai Khan was more important than the impetuous act of a young girl and reminded Marco that the Khan had sent Ling-Tau expressly to command him to reach the

summer palace without delay. Marco was in a quandary which Ian offered to resolve.

'You ride on to Shang-Tu,' he said, 'and I'll ride back, find Ping-Cho and bring her to the summer palace.'

'Good thinking, Chesterton. En route you can verify that my ship is safely on its way,' the Doctor remarked. To Karakorum, Tegana thought. Marco considered the proposition. It was viable. He turned to Ian.

'When can you leave?'

'Now.' And as they rode on, Ian rode back.

13

Road to Karakorum

To Ian's surprise, it took three days hard riding to catch up with Ping-Cho. She was at the small inn beyond Lan-Chow where they had rested after the attack in the bamboo forest.

Ping-Cho burst into tears when she saw him, tears of dismay but, at the same time, tears of relief.

'You've come to take me back, haven't you?' she said, drying her eyes.

'I promised Marco I would see you safely to the summer palace,' Ian replied, 'and I must keep my word.'

'I can't marry an old man I've never met. I won't. Ian.'

'I'm sure the Khan will understand and excuse you from the marriage.' Ian had his fingers crossed mentally and then changed the subject. 'Did you see the Doctor's caravan when you were riding here?' Ping-Cho shook her head.

'I hadn't thought about it, but now that you mention it, no, I didn't.'

'Neither did I. Perhaps the convoy follows a different route.' He shrugged. 'On our way back we'll stop at Lan-Chow and ask Wang-Lo.'

Whilst they were eating their evening meal under the watchful eyes and eavesdropping ears of the innkeeper, Ian spoke of Ping-Cho's attempt to escape.

‘How did you expect to reach Samarkand?’ he asked.

‘I knew I was bound to meet up with a caravan and I have enough gold to pay my way.’ Ian reminded her that they hadn’t met many going in the opposite direction between Lop and Lan-Chow.

‘It is true, my lord, one must wait until there are enough wagons to justify a caravan,’ the innkeeper volunteered,

‘and the lady would need to wait until another moon because a convoy passed through the village yesterday. The old lord’s caravan was part of it.’ Ian nearly choked on his food.

‘The old lord who was here with us?’

‘Yes.’

‘His blue caravan?’

‘Yes.’

‘Going north?’

‘Yes.’

Ian looked at Ping-Cho. ‘It’s too late to do anything tonight but we’re not riding for Shang-Tu in the morning.

You wait for me here whilst I retrieve the Doctor’s flying caravan. Promise me you won’t make another dash.’

‘I promise, Ian,’ Ping-Cho said with a little smile.

Marco was going to bed when he heard the jingling bells and instinctively knew that Ling-Tau had come once again from the summer palace. He threw on his robe and went downstairs where Ling-Tau smiled a greeting and bowed.

‘What is it this time, Ling-Tau?’ Marco asked. Ling-Tau took the sealed parchment from the despatch pocket of his belt.

‘Not for you, Messer Marco, this is for the War Lord Tegana.’

‘I’ll fetch him.’ Marco climbed the stairs, rapped on Tegana’s door and told him the Khan’s courier had a message for him. Tegana came downstairs, tore open the document, read it and turned, stone-faced, to Marco.

‘Kublai Khan will not receive me at the summer palace.

I am to proceed to Peking.’

‘An escort worthy of your rank will arrive tomorrow, my lord,’ Ling-Tau reported. Without comment, Tegana went back to his room.

‘What’s this about?’ Marco asked.

‘I do not know. But you and the Lady Ping-Cho are expected at Shang-Tu.’ Marco explained that Ping-Cho had run away and Ian had gone to fetch her back. Ling-Tau eased his belt and took off his bandeau.

‘I shall go and find them in the morning,’ he said, ‘and in Lan-Chow arrange their escort to Shang-Tu.’

‘Thank you, Ling-Tau.’

‘It will be my pleasure to see the Lady Ping-Cho again,’

he said with a grin.

At dawn Ian rode north and caught up with the convoy beyond the bamboo forests. The TARDIS was no longer with it but the leader told him that Kuiju had left them about two leagues back and taken the wagon along the old Karakorum road. Ian galloped back to the intersection and turned along the abandoned track riding as quickly as he dared.

By mid-afternoon he had Kuiju and the wagon in sight about a third of a league ahead of him. But there was a problem. Kuiju had two companions with him. As Ian stalked them, he tried to resolve the situation, but one against three, even with the element of surprise, seemed long odds. At dusk he heard the bells and, tethering his horse, ran to the centre of the track waving his arms. Ling-Tau reined in.

‘Where is it?’ he asked, jumping to the ground with his bells jingling.

‘Down the road. They’ve bivouaced for the night.’

‘They? How many?’

‘Three.’

‘We’ll surprise them.’

‘And risk a counter-attack in the dark? No, Ling-Tau, let’s wait until

dawn and take them out whilst they're eating. But, please, don't wear your belt.' Ling-Tau laughed and took it off, explaining that he had seen Ping-Cho at the village inn, caught up with the convoy and been told where Ian had gone.

'Tell me about Karakorum,' Ian said.

'It used to be the capital of the Mongol empire,' Ling-Tau replied, 'but when the Khan built his palace in Peking, it was abandoned.'

'It's a deserted city?'

'No, a dispersed one. Karakorum wasn't built of stone.

It was a vast collection of tents and encampments and when the Khan moved to Peking the Mongols folded their tents and left.'

'You mean there is nothing there?'

'Nothing.'

'Then why is someone taking the Doctor's caravan to Karakorum?'

Ling-Tau grinned. 'We'll pose that question at dawn,'

he said.

As the sky began to lighten, Ling-Tau drew his sword from the scabbard attached to his saddle and he and Ian skirted along the edge of the track using the scrub for cover.

'Two of us with one sword,' Ling-Tau observed, 'three of them with, no doubt, three. An advantage of two.'

'Matched by stealth, speed and the fact that we know they're there but they don't know that we're here,' Ian replied with a grin.

As they approached the wagon they could see Kuiju and his two companions squatting on the ground eating with their fingers from a bowl of cold rice and meat. Ian and Ling-Tau exchanged a glance, nodded and struck.

Ian kicked one of them in the solar plexus and left him gasping on the ground. He disarmed him as the second one jumped to his feet and fled into the woods. Kuiju made the mistake of trying to draw his sword but stopped abruptly when the tip of Ling-Tau's pricked his neck.

‘Where were you taking this?’ Ian asked.

‘To Karakorum, my lord.’ Kuiju’s voice quavered.

‘But Karakorum doesn’t exist anymore,’ Ling-Tau said.

‘No, my lord, yes, my lord,’ Kuiju stammered.

‘Why were you taking it there?’ Ian asked. Kuiju remained silent until the sword tip nicked him.

‘At the War Lord Tegana’s bidding. He said it was a tomb he wanted.’

‘A tomb? Is that how he described it?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘It’s one he will never be buried in,’ Ian replied and pointed to the Tartar on the ground. ‘Help your friend here and join your companion in the forest.’

‘Gladly, my lord,’ Kuiju whined and closed his eyes with relief when Ling-Tau lowered the sword. Yet in the back of his mind, Kuiju thought that, at least, he had made fifty golden pieces.

Ian and Ling-Tau took the wagon back to the village inn where Ping-Cho was waiting for them. Ling-Tau put on his belt and his bandeau and told them to stay at the inn until the escort he would send from Lan-Chow arrived to conduct them to the summer palace. Then he bowed to Ian, smiled at Ping-Cho, jumped on his horse and galloped off.

‘He’s a fine young man,’ Ian said as they watched him ride away.

‘Yes,’ Ping-Cho replied demurely, and blushed.

The escort of six warriors arrived in the middle of the next morning and they set off immediately for the way-station at Lan-Chow. It was dark when they arrived and Wang-Lo insisted that the wagon be placed under the hanging gardens where, as he observed, one could keep one’s eyes on it. Ling-Tau had arranged that the wagon join a commercial convoy on the following day but Ian was dubious about letting it out of his sight.

‘One assures you, my lord, that one will not permit a repetition of such an unfortunate occurrence,’ Wang-Lo said with a dramatic gesture. ‘One knows the leader of the convoy who will come

personally to take charge of the wagon.'

As they ate a late-night supper, Ping-Cho asked Ian if he really believed Kublai Khan would let her out of the marriage contract.

'If it were to be seen that your affections lay elsewhere,'

he said, studying his chopsticks before pointing them at her. 'I'll tell you something else. The Doctor's on your side and I've never seen him ultimately outwitted yet. He gets his way.'

In the morning the leader of the convoy, with four warriors, collected the wagon under Ian's watchful eye and a new escort arrived to take them to the summer palace. All along the route they were to discover that their meals and accommodation had been arranged and at each way-station the manager made a point of remarking that it had been the trusted Captain of mighty Kublai Khan, Ling-Tau, who had dealt personally with the matter. Ian noticed that Ping-Cho's blushes became more frequent.

14

Mighty Kublai Khan

Every bone in the Doctor's body ached and each evening in a different way-station he soaked himself in a hot bath knowing he was fighting a losing battle. Nonetheless, he prided himself on his courage and his resilience, with not a murmur of complaint as they trotted across the fertile country beside the river. On the sixth night they stayed at the way-station in Cheng-Ting which was also known as the White City because the colour of the buildings could be seen shimmering from afar in the sunlight. At noon on the seventh day they came to a red lacquered wooden archway with a double filigreed golden gateway attended by two guards in resplendent uniforms. On one side of the archway was the river and on the other side a vast forest stretched off into the distance. The guards opened the gates to let the party through the archway.

'We are entering the grounds of the summer palace,'

Marco said as the Doctor thought it would have been easier to ride around the archway than go through it. In front of them a wide well-kept grass path curved into the forest. As they rode along it, Marco told them about the palace.

'The grounds are enormous,' he said, 'so that the Khan can indulge

himself with his two passions, falconry and hunting.' He turned to Barbara and asked her to guess the number of white stallions in the stables. She thought the question meant there must be a lot.

'Five hundred,' she replied. Marco laughed.

'Twenty times that number.'

'Ten thousand,' Susan exclaimed.

'One horse is more than enough for me,' the Doctor muttered, in the belief that his ordeal was almost at an end.

But they still had two leagues to travel before they emerged from the forest and saw the summer palace in front of them. It stood in the middle of a large clearing encircled by the forest. There was a high, red lacquered wall with a golden trelliswork along the top with a golden dragon at each corner. Barbara estimated that the wall was half-a-mile long. In the middle of it, facing them, was a golden double gate and behind the wall they could see a central dome of gold, flanked by golden spires which towered above it. As they approached the gates, two guards barely touched them with their hands and silently the two halves swung open. The Doctor thought it would come as no surprise if the counterweights were solid gold as well.

Barbara and Susan could hardly believe their eyes as they rode through the open gates. Side walls similar to the one in front stretched back and Barbara realised that there must be a rear one as well. In the centre, dominating everything, stood the summer palace. It was a low squat building of enormous proportions with an elaborate cornice in gold around the edge of the roof, in the centre of which was the golden dome. Four wide steps led up to a veranda enclosed in an elaborate, delicate marble latticework.

'Those inside can see out but those outside can't see in,'

the Doctor murmured to Barbara.

All around the palace were pavilions where members of the Khan's court lived. The grandeur of each pavilion indicated the status of the official who occupied it but they all had beautiful gardens and small lakes. Marco led the way to one of the most luxurious where they dismounted and attendants took charge of their horses.

'This is the Polo pavilion,' he announced. 'It has three apartments, my father's, my uncle's and mine but as they are both abroad in the

Khan's service, there is more than enough space for all of us.'

They went inside. There was a central courtyard with a floating garden and the decorations and furnishings in the rooms surrounding it were so magnificent that Susan thought that the pavilion made the way-stations where they had stayed look like hovels in comparison. A middle-aged official of important appearance came into the pavilion and bowed to Marco.

'Mighty Kublai Khan will be pleased to receive Messer Marco Polo and his honourable guests when you are all refreshed,' he proclaimed and left.

'We are in good favour,' Marco said with a smile. 'That was the Khan's personal secretary.'

The Doctor moaned gently in sheer delight as he lay back in his bathtub and thought that there would be no need to mount another horse - ever again, he mentally added for good measure. But as he dressed, his aches and pains came back with renewed intensity and he realised it had been a mistake to dismiss the wretched animals so abruptly from his life. He should have eased the beasts out of it, little by little every day.

Wearing his flowing silk gown and mandarin's hat, he hobbled onto the courtyard where Susan, Barbara and Marco, all refreshed, were laughing, chatting and waiting for him. The Doctor clapped a grim smile on his face and straightened his back. Both actions hurt.

'Come and meet the Master of all Asia, Doctor.' Marco said.

'Fiddlesticks,' the Doctor replied but added that he would not deny the Khan the honour of meeting him.

Leisurely, they walked across immaculately-tended lawns and gardens to the four steps leading onto the veranda. The Doctor had been right. From inside, it was almost as though the marble latticework didn't exist and they could see the gardens, lawns and pavilions perfectly.

They crossed the veranda to a very finely filigreed golden double gate.

'The same effect, I suppose,' Barbara said. Marco nodded.

'Wait until they're opened,' he replied as two palace guards touched the gates which swung away. If Marco's pavilion made the way-stations look like hovels, Susan thought, the summer palace had the

same effect on Marco's pavilion. It was sumptuous. The building was square with a large central courtyard. The walls, windows and doors were all elaborately decorated with dragons, snakes, butterflies and birds with their eyes made of precious stones, diamonds, jade, rubies, coral, aquamarines and pearls. The courtyard was a floating garden with water lilies, fountains and four bridges which spanned the garden to an island on which stood another elaborately decorated square building. But the most astonishing thing of all was the dome. It was not part of the building. It was a canopy of gold supported by four arched golden girders, reaching in from the four corners of the outer building.

'That's where the Khan lives,' Marco said, pointing to it. 'If this is the summer palace, what must the one at Peking be like?' Barbara asked.

'It is a walled city within a city,' Marco replied as he led them over one of the bridges. Two more guards opened a pair of golden filigreed doors and they walked along a marble corridor lined with painted lifelike statues of warriors. Marco explained that the tradition of protecting the ruler of Cathay with imitation warriors had been started centuries ago by the Emperor Qin Shi Huang who had six thousand made to protect his tomb, but no one now knew where he was buried.

'Dig around Xian, which was the capital,' the Doctor suggested, 'you might find something there.'

The two guards at the far end of the corridor were real and they opened the golden panelled double doors leading to the throne room.

'Look up,' Marco said as they went in. The ceiling was a latticework of ivory beyond which the golden dome could be seen. The throne was on a dais set against the back wall which was draped with richly embroidered silk curtains.

The high-backed throne was of gold, studded with precious stones on the arms, legs and the canopy. On the side walls were golden double doors, one of which opened as the Khan's personal secretary came into the room. He touched his fingers together, bowed to them and straightened up.

'When the mighty Kublai Khan appears, you will make your obeisance to him so that he will look kindly upon you and spare your worthless lives,' he announced. The Doctor recalled that the original invitation to meet the Khan had been delivered in much more friendly terms.

‘What, pray, am I supposed to do?’ The edge of sarcasm was evident in his voice.

‘Kow-tow,’ the secretary replied. ‘Kneel before the all-powerful Khan and touch your forehead three times to the floor.’

‘I’ll do no such thing,’ the Doctor said indignantly. The secretary looked startled.

‘Kublai Khan is the mightiest warrior all Asia has ever seen,’ he protested, ‘and not to pay homage to him will cost you your head.’

‘Paying him homage will break my back,’ the Doctor retorted.

‘Grandfather, don’t argue. Do as you’re told, please,’

Susan pleaded.

‘Quiet, child. I refuse to make a spectacle of -’ But he never finished the sentence as a gong drowned out his words. The secretary raised one hand.

‘Silence,’ he called out, ‘those who dare to come before the sight of mighty Kublai Khan, kow-tow. Kow-tow before the War Lord of War Lords, all powerful and fearsome in his strength. Kow-tow before the Master of Asia, Cathay, India and other territories beyond. Kow-tow.’ Marco, Susan and Barbara knelt. The Doctor remained standing.

‘Grandfather,’ Susan hissed.

‘Kow-tow,’ the secretary commanded.

‘I’ll never manage it,’ the Doctor complained as he sank awkwardly and painfully to his knees with little moans and groans of agony. Out of the corner of her eye Susan saw a most imposing man in a magnificent gold-threaded blue silk gown with a silver belt around his waist. On his head he wore a hat which resembled a bishop’s mitre and he carried a gold staff in one hand.

‘Kow-tow,’ the secretary commanded.

‘Aaah,’ the Doctor exclaimed, but his cry was lost in a yelp of pain from a little old man who was hobbling along with a cane behind the dignified man.

‘Kow-tow,’ the secretary repeated, as the little old man grabbed the arm of the throne and tried to lift one foot onto the dais.

‘Aaah,’ he cried out which was echoed by the Doctor.

The little old man collapsed with another cry onto the throne and looked angrily at the Doctor.

‘Do you mock our affliction?’ he asked in a high-pitched, thin voice. The Doctor was kneeling with his head several inches above the floor at which he was staring.

‘No, it’s my back,’ he said irritably, ‘I can’t move it.’

With a little moan of pain the Master of all Asia eased out his gout-ridden foot.

‘What ails it?’

‘It’s seized up. I can’t move,’ the Doctor wailed. Mighty Kublai Khan turned to the imposing man who stood at the side of the dais.

‘Grand Vizier, help our honourable guest,’ - he pointed at the Doctor with his cane - ‘to his feet. And you, ladies, and you, Marco, stand up,’ he added, waving his cane at them. Suddenly, his face paled and he let out another anguished cry as the Grand Vizier with Marco took the Doctor by both arms and tried to straighten him. Susan and Barbara watched anxiously. Kublai looked at them.

‘These gracious ladies accompany you?’ he asked.

‘Yes, great Khan.’

‘You are most welcome to our Court,’ Kublai inclined his head to them. ‘The Captain Ling-Tau has reported to us that the Lady Ping-Cho follows on with another of your party and an escort. Also, that the War Lord Tegana has gone on to Peking.’

‘In obedience to your command, great Khan.’

‘We shall discuss the War Lord’s mission, Marc-ouch,’

he yelped, and pointed his cane at the Doctor. ‘How did you come by your ailment?’

‘I’ve spent the last seven days on horseback, Sire,’ the Doctor replied, ‘and it is a mode of transportation to which I am unaccustomed.’ The Khan looked concerned.

‘We ride for Peking tomorrow, we fear,’ Kublai confessed.

‘Not another horse,’ the Doctor exclaimed. ‘I couldn’t lift my foot into a stirrup, let alone, mount the monster.’

Pointing to the Khan’s foot, he observed that, for the life of him, he didn’t see the Khan riding a horse either.

‘We have a carriage of state and tomorrow, noble sir, you shall ride with us.’

‘Most generous of you, Sire,’ the Doctor replied and attempted a little bow which sent a stab of pain across his back. ‘Aaah,’ he squeaked clamping both hands over his kidneys.

‘We shall be pleased if you will dine with us this evening,’ and Kublai ordered the Grand Vizier to make the necessary seating arrangements, placing the Empress between the Doctor and himself. Then, with little groans and yelps, he stood up gingerly.

‘The audience is terminated,’ the secretary intoned.

‘Kow-tow.’ A look of sheer anguish crossed the Doctor’s face. Kublai held up one hand.

‘No, no, no,’ he protested. ‘We waive this mark of obeisance out of respect for our noble guest’s affliction.’ He beckoned the Doctor to his side and he limped over.

‘There are healing waters here which relieve our gout. Let us observe their effect upon your miseries. Take our arm.’

The Doctor obeyed. ‘What a burden old age is,’ Kublai sighed.

‘A trial to be borne with dignity, Sire,’ the Doctor observed.

‘You are right, our friend. With dignity,’ Kublai replied and with little ‘oohs’, ‘aahs’ and ‘ouches’, the two of them hobbled out of the throne room.

15

Gamblers

Shortly before the banquet, Marco was summoned to Kublai’s personal sitting room. It was small but exquisitely furnished with carved ebony chairs and a low table with ivory inlays. The walls were hung with delicate hand-painted scrolls and the window looked out onto a small, beautifully arranged flower garden. To Marco’s surprise Ling-Tau was

taking tea with Kublai who waved Marco to a chair and let him pour himself a cup of tea.

'What is this War Lord's tomb Ling-Tau told us about?'

Kublai asked. Marco looked puzzled.

'War Lord's tomb? Pardon my ignorance, great Khan, but I do not understand you.' Kublai turned to Ling-Tau.

'Recount for us once again your adventures,' he said and Ling-Tau told an increasingly astonished Marco all that had happened on the road to Karakorum although he did not mention Tegana's involvement. When Ling-Tau finished, Marco, who had long since put down his untouched cup of tea, spread out his hands in bewilderment.

'Great Khan, it is not a War Lord's tomb, it is a caravan that flies.'

'A flying caravan?' Kublai exclaimed incredulously.

'From whence does it come?' With pangs of conscience, Marco recounted meeting the Doctor and his companions.

'A caravan that travels through the air.' Kublai beamed.

'This we must see.'

'It is yours, great Khan, I claimed it in your name. But I have promised to take the Doctor and the others back to Venice with me,' he added, hoping Kublai would take the hint. Then he frowned. 'But how did it come to be on the road to Karakorum?' Kublai smiled.

'It was being sent there by the Wrar Lord Tegana,' he said simply.

'What?' Marco was astounded. 'But there is nothing at Karakorum.'

'Other than Noghai's Tartar hordes.'

Marco put one hand to his forehead. 'But when I collected the Lady Ping-Cho and the War Lord Tegana at Samarkand all that remained of Noghai's defeated army was less than ten leagues away.'

'And now revitalised and reinforced, it stands at Karakorum with Noghai at its head.' Kublai toyed with his cup. 'We shall be interested in the War Lord Tegana's justification of its presence so close to ourself.'

‘Then why did you command him to go directly to Peking, great Khan?’

Kublai smiled ingenuously. ‘That is where our army, reinforced from our southern provinces, is exercising. We thought it appropriate that the War Lord should see it and realise that we, not him, shall be negotiating the terms of peace from the position of strength.’ Kublai leant heavily on his cane, stood up and looked at Ling-Tau. ‘Ride back and see that our flying caravan is sent directly to Peking.

Also advise the Lady Ping-Cho and her companion, the noble Ian, to ride for our palace there.’

‘I shall be swifter than an arrow in flight, great Khan.’

Ling-Tau smiled, bowed and left the room.

‘Give us your arm, Marco. The healing waters had an excellent effect on the Doctor’s aches and pains,’ Kublai said as Marco helped him from the room. ‘When he told us his name we hoped he might be a physician and cure our affliction, once and for all. But it was not to be.’ He sighed.

‘A caravan that flies through the air,’ he mused aloud and chuckled, ‘that will put Noghai in his place.’ Marco thought that if it had reached Karakorum it would have had the same effect on Kublai.

The Empress was a large lady and the Doctor observed that mighty Kublai Khan was petrified of her, although when they spoke he frequently used terms of endearment such as

‘turtle-dove’ and ‘lotus-blossom’. The Doctor also noted that the Empress enjoyed her food and he understood why Kublai suffered from gout. In all, there were about a hundred people seated at the various tables and approximately the same number of dishes were served.

There was a choice of, at least, fifteen soups, including one called a ‘water-melon pond’, and egg dishes in profusion followed by fresh-water as well as sea-water fishes and crustaceans. Then, of course, came the poultry dishes which reminded the Doctor of the old adage that the Chinese eat everything bar the feathers. Next on the menu were the meat and vegetable bowls served with a multitude of rices, after which the meal was rounded out with a variety of desserts. The wines were of every hue and taste and to the Doctor’s astonishment there were Italian and French ones as well as champagne.

‘My father imports them,’ Marco said modestly.

During the banquet and between mouthfuls the Empress expressed her regrets that the Lady Ping-Cho had been unable to attend whilst her husband-to-be, indicating a watery-eyed old man at one end of the head table, languished for her arrival. Kublai patted the Empress’s hand.

‘Exquisite butterfly,’ he said with a quick glance at Marco, ‘the Lady Ping-Cho was unavoidably detained at Lan-Chow.’ The Empress popped a succulent slice of pineapple roast duck into her mouth and suggested that another banquet should be held on the eve of Ping-Cho’s nuptials in Peking. Mighty Kublai Khan did not argue.

Ling-Tau found Ping-Cho and Ian at a way-station just after dawn and instructed their escort to take them directly to Peking, adding that he would ride on to order the warriors accompanying the wagon to deliver it there as well. Then he bowed to them and turned to leave.

‘Stay and have some breakfast,’ Ian suggested.

‘Yes, please do,’ Ping-Cho said a shade too quickly and, blushing, looked down at her food. Ling-Tau took off his bandeau and belt and then sat down with them. As they ate he recounted Marco’s interview with the Khan and when he was finished Ian shook his head in amusement.

‘When will Kublai, Tegana and Marco realise that only one man, the Doctor, has the knowledge to make his caravan fly? I haven’t, nor has Barbara. Susan, perhaps, because she is his granddaughter, but no one else. So it is a useless weapon in their jostling for power.’

‘But the great Khan and the noble Doctor have become friends so would he not assist mighty Kublai in this struggle for dominance?’ Ling-Tau asked.

‘No, Ling-Tau, he would not and could not for reasons too complex to explain.’

‘Does it fly fast?’ Ping-Cho asked.

‘Very fast,’ Ian replied.

‘Faster than the noble Ling-Tau on a horse?’ Ian smiled at her.

‘Yes, I’m afraid so.’

‘I would like to see the Doctor’s caravan fly.’

‘So would I,’ Ling-Tau added.

‘Perhaps you will,’ Ian said, ‘at Peking.’

The carriage of state was luxurious. It was long and had four wheels. The sides and top were, once again. an ivory latticework apart from the central golden doors and a silken canopy which could be drawn over the top if the sun’s rays became too strong. The interior was lavishly furnished with cushions and a low ebony table. The carriage was drawn by five pairs of white stallions and there were two drivers as well as the four footmen who stood on the back. In all, there were three carriages, each slightly less magnificent than the one ahead of it. The Empress and her retinue were in the second, the Grand Vizier and his in the third. Susan and Marco rode white stallions and on either side of the procession a line of warriors jogged. Kublai arched an eyebrow and glanced at the Doctor reclining on the other side of the table.

‘Do you wager, dear friend?’ he asked.

‘I’ve been known to, Sire,’ the Doctor replied.

‘The Empress disapproves,’ Kublai confided.

‘Ah,’ the Doctor said, unable to think of anything else.

‘Backgammon?’ Kublai suggested, taking a box from underneath the table, ‘to while away the time.’

‘Why not, Sire?’ the Doctor answered and Kublai opened the box.

At midday the procession stopped for a roadside picnic under a huge elaborately decorated silk canopy. The Doctor found the snack only slightly less extravagant than the previous night’s banquet.

‘And how did we spend our morning?’ the Empress asked Kublai as she stuffed a dried shrimp wanton into her mouth. The Doctor thought her choice of verb was unfortunate.

‘Conversing on this and that, precious fawn.’ Kublai looked at the Doctor for confirmation.

‘The Dynasties of Asia, gracious Empress,’ the Doctor volunteered.

Kublai clutched at the straw. ‘We discussed our lamented uncle,

Jenghis, saying he was the warrior of the family, beloved panda. Nothing frightened him. We are but a poor planner, an administrator of sorts.'

'The mighty Khan demeans himself,' the Empress said to the Doctor as she reached out for a Lan-Chow steamed dumpling. 'His only weakness is that he likes to gamble.'

The Doctor thought it an appropriate moment to taste a sliver of the chicken chessmen.

As they approached the golden gates of the palace at Peking Kublai closed the backgammon box and put it under the table.

'What is the reckoning?' he enquired. The Doctor thought for a moment.

'You owe me, Sire, thirty-five elephants with ceremonial bridles, trappings, brocades and pavilions,' he said, 'and four thousand white stallions as well as twenty-five tigers.'

'That's not too serious,' Kublai commented.

'Plus the sacred tooth of Buddha and all the commerce from Burma for a year,' the Doctor added. Kublai winced.

'Those last two debts are distressing,' he admitted.

'Marco brought us the tooth from India and when the Empress is not at table she pores over the accounts. Will you allow us to try and win them back?' He sounded wistful.

'All of them, Sire,' the Doctor replied magnanimously as the plan for recovering the TARDIS formed in his head.

Marco had not exaggerated when he described the palace at Peking as a walled city within a city. Architecturally, it was different to the summer palace. There were no latticework walls through which a cooling breeze could pass. On the contrary, the walls were substantial, designed to keep out the winter winds. There were mosaic paved alleyways lined with houses where Kublai's retinue, some fifteen thousand, lived. As at Shang-Tu four wide tree-lined avenues led from the walls to the central square and the ornate palace which had more than a thousand rooms.

The carriage of state drew up in front of the main entrance as servants

hurriedly placed the steps in front of the golden doors and helped Kublai and the Doctor to descend. Carefully, with the aid of his cane and leaning on the Doctor's arm, Kublai went up to the palace entrance where guards had opened the golden doors.

'You know, dear friend,' Kublai confided as they went inside, 'we like the summer palace very much. But, finally, we think there is no place like home.' Secretly, the Doctor agreed with him.

16

Best-laid Schemes

In accordance with Kublai's instructions, the War Lord Tegana was welcomed at the Peking palace in a manner that befitted his importance. He was shown to a ten-room suite and twenty servants were assigned to him. On the following morning the Khan's three military commanders called on him to pay their respects and suggested that he might care to inspect the army. Tegana readily agreed and they rode to a camp north of the city. It was a sea of multicoloured tents and each one flew a banner representing the company to which the warriors belonged.

Tegana estimated that Kublai's force-of-arms was twice the size of Noghai's but that did not dismay him.

On a nearby plain five thousand archers were firing at clay warriors. Very few arrows fell short of, or missed their targets. On another plain ten thousand cavalrymen with lances charged down on bags of straw suspended on poles and elsewhere fifteen thousand foot warriors drilled in perfect unison. As they, rode back to the palace Tegana invited the three commanders to dine with him that evening and they accepted. Over the meal they discussed Noghai's defeat by Kublai's army near Samarkand.

'It was your element of surprise that caught us out,'

Tegana conceded, 'your ability to travel so far, so swiftly and then fight. We were ill-prepared for the battle. It would not happen again.'

'It is to be hoped that it will never happen again.' the cavalry commander replied, 'as you come to the Court as an emissary of peace.'

Tegana smiled and thought they were fools, as was Kublai, if they believed he had not understood the purpose of the day's exercise and

he knew who now held the element of surprise.

Kublai's retinue, with the Doctor, Susan and Barbara, arrived the next evening and the Grand Vizier had already arranged their accommodation. Dinner was intimate, no more than forty people, and the Doctor noted that the War Lord Tegana was conspicuous by his absence. The Empress, between mouthfuls, was deciding the dishes to be served at Ping-Cho's pre-nuptial banquet on the following evening and glancing coyly at the old husband-to-be whom the Doctor considered had sunk irretrievably into his dotage.

It was mid-morning when Ping-Cho, Ian and Ling-Tau reached the palace. Ling-Tau went directly to his quarters while Ping-Cho and Ian were shown to their apartments.

As soon as he could, Ian found the Doctor and told him all that had happened. The Doctor frowned.

'Both Polo and the Khan knew about Tegana's attempt to steal my ship?' he asked.

'Yes, Doctor. Ling-Tau reported it to Kublai who told Marco.'

'Yet no one informed me. When will it arrive?'

'Tomorrow afternoon, Doctor.'

'This requires thought, Chesterton. There is mischief afoot,' the Doctor said darkly, 'but what?'

Ping-Cho found Susan's four-room apartment and when she saw her, burst into tears.

'There's to be a banquet tonight to present me to my husband-to-be,' she wailed, 'and we are to be married tomorrow. I can't do it, Susan, I'd sooner die.'

'Let's move your things in here with me.' Susan sounded brusque and efficient. 'Then we'll work out what can be done about it.' But they could think of nothing practical short of Ping-Cho throwing herself on her knees and begging Kublai to excuse her from the marriage which would offend the watery-eyed old man and her family in Samarkand, as well as the Empress who had taken great pains to organise the feast. Worst of all, they both realised that Kublai might reject Ping-Cho's entreaty because of protocol.

‘What is so cruel,’ Ping-Cho said miserably, ‘is that my heart flies to someone else.’ Susan thought for a moment.

‘Ling-Tau?’ she ventured. Ping-Cho nodded. Susan whistled silently. ‘Then it’s up to grandfather to persuade Kublai to let the match be broken,’ she said. ‘He can be very persuasive, my grandfather, and he and Kublai have become good friends.’ Ping-Cho shook her head.

‘Why should the Doctor intercede on my behalf when his flying caravan has been taken from him in the Khan’s name? No, Susan,’ Ping-Cho sighed, ‘there is only one solution.’

‘Stop that, Ping-Cho, no you don’t.’ There was a knock on the door which Susan opened. The Grand Vizier and Ling-Tau stood there.

‘Mighty Kublai Khan commands the presence of the Lady Ping-Cho before him,’ the Grand Vizier intoned.

Ping-Cho grabbed Susan’s arm.

‘Come with me, please,’ she begged.

‘Of course,’ Susan replied and the four of them went to the throne room where both Kublai and the Empress awaited them.

‘Kow-tow,’ the Grand Vizier ordered.

‘No, no, no.’ Kublai dismissed the obeisance, wagging a forefinger.

‘Fly to my arms, child,’ cried the Empress. ‘Let me share your grief.’

‘I do not understand you, gracious Empress,’ Ping-Cho looked mystified as she curtsied. ‘What has occurred?’

Kublai beckoned her over to him.

‘There has been a tragedy,’ he said gently. ‘Your beloved husband-to-be, so anxious to be worthy of your esteem, yet more, your love, drank a potion of quicksilver and sulphur, the elixir of life and eternal youth and expired on the spot.’

‘Oh,’ Ping-Cho replied, glancing furtively at Susan but carefully avoiding Ling-Tau’s eyes.

‘Will you not weep for a lost love?’ The Empress’s voice rang with accusation. Ping-Cho hung her head for a few seconds and then looked the Empress in the eyes.

‘Gracious Empress, I grieve an old man’s death as all would do. But how can I weep for a love I have never known?’

‘What is your wish, Ping-Cho?’ Kublai asked. ‘To return to your home in Samarkand, or will you stay awhile in our Court to brighten all our days?’ Ping-Cho glanced at Ling-Tau and blushed, which did not go unnoticed by Kublai or the Empress. Then she smiled at Kublai.

‘If I may, great Khan, I would like to stay.’

‘So be it,’ Kublai replied.

‘Your decision to remain will be the reason for our banquet tonight,’ the Empress exclaimed, mentally allocating Ping-Cho’s late would-be husband’s place to Ling-Tau.

The Doctor held a council-of-war with Barbara and Ian in his six-room suite.

‘Within minutes of my ship being at the palace, we shall be on our way,’ he announced. Both Barbara and Ian were taken aback.

‘How?’ they asked in unison.

‘I shall be in possession of the key,’ the Doctor sounded confident.

‘How?’ They put the same question again.

‘I shall have won both it and my ship,’ he said grandly.

‘Won?’ They were suspicious.

‘Playing backgammon with Kublai tomorrow morning.’

He told them of all he had won on the journey from Shang-Tu. ‘I shall wager it all against the TARDIS.’ Barbara and Ian looked anxiously at each other.

‘What if you were to lose, Doctor?’ Ian finally asked.

The Doctor looked offended.

‘That is out of the question, Chesterton,’ he snapped, ‘I am the infinitely better player.’

Barbara crossed her fingers.

The banquet, for about five hundred people, was, in the opinion of the Empress, so successful that after her third helping of Yang-Chow shrimp balls she turned to Kublai.

'Promote him.'

'Promote whom, scintillating glow-worm?'

'Ling-Tau. Make him the commander of the palace guard or some such position so that he is worthy of the Lady Ping-Cho's hand.' She stretched out her chopsticks and plucked a sweet-and-sour spare rib from a dish.

'We take your meaning, beauteous butterfly,' Kublai replied.

The War Lord Tegana also had a suggestion to make.

He wanted a private interview with the mighty Kublai Khan in the morning. Kublai, with a quick glance at the Doctor, was obliged to refuse but agreed to receive the War Lord in the afternoon after he had received Marco's gift of a flying caravan. Although Tegana's face remained impassive, the Doctor saw the shock in his eyes and thought that now there was much more than mischief afoot. But it was none of his business, he thought, as by the end of the day the four of them would probably be light-years away.

In the morning the Doctor went to the throne room where Kublai was waiting alone for him. The room was even more imposing than the one at the summer palace. Again the throne stood on a dais against a brocaded back wall and there were golden double doors in the centres of the other three walls which were lined with statues, busts and ornaments in jade, gold, silver, ivory and coral, all of them on individual pedestals. Kublai was standing beside one in jade near the back wall. It was round and reminded the Doctor of an ornate doorknob. Kublai turned it and a section of the wall swung open to reveal a small antechamber.

'The Empress doesn't know about this one,' Kublai said with a nudge as they went in. A similar knob on a similar pedestal on the inside closed the wall behind them. There was no lighting yet the room was bright from the phosphorescent paint used to decorate it.

'Look,' Kublai said, pointing to a Judas-eye in the wall, through which the throne room could be seen.

'And, Sire, if the Empress were therein?' the Doctor asked. Kublai

chuckled and crossed to the opposite wall where there was another Judas-eye and door knob on a pedestal.

'It opens onto the corridor so that we may slip out and enter the throne room with all propriety.' In the middle of the room was an ivory table with a backgammon board on it. Two high-backed ebony chairs faced one another across the table.

'Shall we play, dear friend?' Kublai asked.

'Gladly,' the Doctor replied and they sat down.

In the Doctor's suite, Susan, Barbara and Ian paced nervously.

'Grandfather's bound to win,' Susan said, 'think back to the chess games crossing the Gobi desert.'

'And everything he's already won from Kublai at backgammon,' Barbara added.

'Yes,' Ian agreed, 'the odds are on his side.'

An hour later the Doctor came in.

'I lost,' he said, and slumped into a chair.

17

Key to the World

The Doctor watched disconsolately from a balcony as the TARDIS was delivered on its wagon in the middle of the afternoon. It was still on the original platform to which Ian and Marco had strapped it months ago on the Plain of Pamir. Carefully the platform was slid off the wagon and carried by fifty servants into the palace and the throne room.

'There's one consolation, Doctor,' Barbara said, standing at his side with Susan and Ian, 'we're all safely under the same roof again.' The Doctor grunted and patted her hand. From a window the War Lord Tegana also watched its arrival.

'It flies, you say?' Kublai turned to Marco who stood beside the throne.

'Yes, great Khan.'

‘Give us your arm and let us examine this caravan.’

Slowly Kublai, suffering from a recurrence of gout brought on by the previous evening’s banquet, hobbled around it.

‘We find the caravan small, Marco, barely enough room for the Empress and ourself, let alone our retinue.’

‘On my oath, great Khan, the Doctor and his three companions were travelling in it.’

‘Is the caravan an optical illusion, as our magicians create for us to see what we do not see? Measure the dimensions, Marco.’ Pacing out his steps, Marco walked around it.

‘No illusion, great Khan,’ he said as he helped Kublai back to the throne. Kublai stared at his flying caravan.

‘Summon the Doctor to our presence and do not bother to retire backwards kow-towing.’ Marco smiled, bowed and left to confront the silent group in the Doctor’s suite.

‘Kublai Khan wants to see you, Doctor,’ he said lamely under their cold stares and, suddenly, was overwhelmed by guilt. ‘I’m sorry. I should never have done what I did. It was selfish and, therefore, unjustifiable.’

‘Give the Doctor the key and we’ll go,’ Ian answered abruptly. Marco looked at them for a moment and then nodded.

‘I’ll go and fetch it.’

‘You’ll do no such thing, Polo.’ The Doctor jumped to his feet. ‘Both those keys are the property of the flying caravan’s rightful owner, Kublai Khan.’ He pointed an accusing finger at Marco. ‘You took it away from me illegally and I naturally tried every recourse to take it back from you. But I lost my ship to Kublai Khan in a game of backgammon and gambling debts must always be honoured or redeemed. I shall come with you to see him.’

Leaving Barbara, Susan and Ian gaping in stupefaction, the Doctor, followed by Marco, strode from the room.

Kublai was still staring at his flying caravan when the Grand Vizier announced that Marco and the Doctor awaited the great Khan’s pleasure in an ante-room. Kublai beckoned to him for them to enter.

As they did so, the Grand Vizier intoned ‘Kow-tow’.

‘Do stop it,’ Kublai cried, ‘the very idea makes my foot throb.’ Then he smiled at the Doctor. ‘Do you have a key to our flying caravan, dear friend?’ The Doctor glanced at Marco and then turned back to Kublai.

‘No, Sire, Polo has them.’

‘Them, dear friend?’

‘There are two, Sire.’

‘And Marco has them both?’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘On you, good Marco?’

‘No, great Khan, in my suite.’

‘Fetch them for us.’ Marco bowed and left the room.

‘We are told, dear friend, that only you know how to open the door of our flying caravan.’

‘That is true, Sire.’

‘Will you instruct us in the method?’

‘No, Sire, I will not.’

‘Why do you refuse us?’

‘Because inside is a world beyond your understanding, Sire.’

‘So we own a flying caravan in which we may not fly.’

‘Yes, Sire.’ Kublai leant back on his throne and winced.

‘You should go on a diet, Sire. Banquets are all very well but as Master of all Asia you should take more care of your health.’ Kublai began to chuckle.

‘With our flying caravan, we are Master of the World, dear friend.’

‘When it was mine, I never felt that way about it, Sire. I used it to travel from A to B, or sometimes from A to Z.’

‘You are not a Khan, dear friend, we are. And to rule we need the symbols of power. The sacred tooth of Buddha confirms our dominance over India, this palace over all Cathay and beyond.’ Kublai pointed to the TARDIS. ‘Our flying caravan is also a symbol of power, absolute power.’

Marco came back into the room and held out the two keys. Kublai took one of them and instructed Marco to have the second destroyed. Marco put it in his pocket.

Kublai turned the key over slowly in his hand and smiled at the Doctor. ‘No, we are wrong, dear friend. Whosoever holds this has the key to the world.’ He glanced at the Grand Vizier. ‘Fetch us immediately a chain of finely beaten gold that we may wear this permanently around our neck. Holding the Key to the World,’ he mused aloud as the Vizier hurried out, ‘that’s even better than being Master of the World.’ He smiled and looked at the Doctor.

‘We shall never play backgammon with you again, dear friend.’

‘I am now fully aware of that, Sire,’ the Doctor replied.

The Doctor and Marco walked back to the suite in silence where Ian, Barbara and Susan waited for them. Once inside the main room Marco took the second key from his pocket and offered it to the Doctor.

‘I am not one given to repeating myself, Polo. Either honoured or redeemed.’ The Doctor sat down and shook his head with a sad smile. ‘He has delusions of grandeur, Chesterton.’

‘Marco?’ Ian was shocked.

‘No, Kublai. He thinks he has the Key to the World. I’d like a cup of tea.’ He clapped his hands and several servants scurried in.

The Grand Vizier found a suitable chain and took it to the throne room. Kublai threaded it through the key and had the Grand Vizier secure the clasp at the back of his neck.

‘A mirror,’ Kublai commanded. The Grand Vizier brought one and mighty Kublai Khan sat admiring the Key to the World that hung around his neck. ‘Where is the War Lord Tegana?’ he asked.

‘In his suite, great Khan, waiting to be summoned.’

‘Send for him and we shall discuss our revised terms for peace with

Noghai,' Kublai said, fingering the key.

The commander of the infantry found Tegana pacing in full ceremonial Tartar dress, breeches tucked into his boots, a multicoloured blouse tightly belted at the waist with his sabre tucked under it.

'Mighty Kublai Khan, the Master of all Asia, is pleased to receive you,' the commander announced.

'Alone,' Tegana stated, 'I am the great Khan Noghai's emissary, therefore it will be as if both Khans were discussing the terms of peace.'

'Mighty Kublai Khan is aware of that,' the commander replied and escorted Tegana to the throne room.

While sipping his tea the Doctor had been turning over in his mind the events of the past months. He was not overly concerned about the TARDIS. He would retrieve it.

Eventually Kublai would yield it to him. But something in the back of his mind was nagging him and he couldn't think what it was. Was it something he had seen on their long journey or a phrase someone had uttered? He put it out of his head and chortled.

'The key to my ship making one Master of the World,'

he remarked, 'when one cannot even be the master of one's own destiny.' He stopped and thought again. 'Master of the World,' he whispered and looked at Marco.

'Polo, do you remember the bandit attack at the bamboo forest?'

'Of course, Doctor.'

'Do you remember what their leader said just before Tegana killed him?'

'Something about Tegana being awake.'

'Before that.'

'No, I don't.'

'I do. He said, "so the Master of the World's War Lord Tegana is awake", and he meant Noghai.' The Doctor dropped his cup and

saucer which broke. ‘There’s not mischief afoot, Polo, there’s murder. Tegana is going to kill the Khan and Kublai has a private audience with him this afternoon. Quickly, call out the palace guard, Polo, we’ve not a moment to lose!’

Kublai’s personal secretary was with him when he received Tegana.

‘Was this not to be a private audience?’ Tegana asked.

‘But it is. Our secretary is only here to record our discussion for both our benefit.’

‘I do not wish his presence,’ Tegana replied and, drawing his sabre, slew the personal secretary. Kublai recoiled in horror as Tegana calmly locked the three golden doors to the throne room. Kublai tried to stop him but was hindered by his gout and Tegana pushed him aside as he pocketed the keys.

‘Master of all Asia,’ he sneered, ‘is that who you think you are? It is not true. You are a gout-ridden old fool and the great Khan Noghai will wear the key and sit on that throne as Master of the World.’ Kublai clutched the key.

Tegana smiled. ‘I shall decapitate you to obtain it.’ The handles of the throne room doors rattled, which made Tegana laugh out loud. ‘It is difficult sometimes to have access to mighty Kublai Khan,’ he observed.

‘You will also die, Tegana,’ Kublai said, sitting back on the throne.

‘That I am prepared to do as long as the great Khan Noghai sits where you now spend the last few minutes of your life.’

‘Our force of arms would defeat Noghai’s again,’ Kublai countered.

‘I have seen your army and it is impressive, but you must take into account the leadership. Kill the General and there is chaos.’ Tegana walked around the TARDIS

tapping it with his sabre. ‘The flying caravan of the greatest Khan of all, Noghai.’ He threw back his head and roared with laughter.

The Doctor, with the others outside, heard him.

‘I know how to get in there,’ he said, ‘follow me.’ He ran along the exterior corridor of the throne room, looking at the busts and objects

on their pedestals. Marco and Ling-Tau, who was armed with a bow and arrow, as well as several guards, followed him.

'This is the one,' the Doctor said and turned the knob.

The wall swung open and they went into the gaming room.

'Be prepared, Ling-Tau,' the Doctor whispered. Ling-Tau charged his bow as the Doctor peeked through the Judas-eye. 'Kublai's still alive,' he reported and twisted the knob on the pedestal. The inner wall swung open and Tegana never saw the flight of the arrow that killed him instantly.

'Redeemed?' the Doctor asked Marco.

'Redeemed,' Marco replied and handed him the key.

Kublai leant back on the throne and requested that someone close both gaming room doors before taking the keys from Tegana's body and opening the others.

'We would not want the Empress to know,' he said apologetically.

Later, they all stood in the throne room before Kublai and the Empress. Kublai looked at the Doctor.

'We require a new personal secretary, dear friend.

Would such a situation interest you?' he asked with a surreptitious glance at the gaming room wall.

'Sire, we are travellers and it is time to move on.' Kublai touched his key.

'Does this really open your flying caravan?' he asked.

'Lend it to me, Sire, and you shall see.'

Kublai undid the clasp and handed the chain and the key to the Doctor. He opened the door and gave back the key. Kublai looked at the Doctor intently.

'Humbly we think, dear friend, that you have the key to many worlds.' The Doctor inclined his head. 'And we shall take your advice and diet.'

'Farewell, Sire,' the Doctor said and turned to Marco.

‘Goodbye, Polo, have a good voyage home but keep a sharp look-out for the Genoese.’

He said goodbye to Ling-Tau and Ping-Cho, then went into his ship. Barbara and Ian said their farewells and Susan kissed Ping-Cho on both cheeks.

‘Cherish her, Ling-Tau,’ she murmured.

‘I will, my lady, on my oath.’

Susan closed the door and the Doctor crossed to the central control panel.

‘Dematerialisation, at last,’ he said hopefully, rubbing his hands together before he pressed the button.

Outside, in the throne room, Ping-Cho squeezed Ling-Tau’s arm as the TARDIS became a shimmering shield of light and then vanished.

‘A flying caravan, Marco,’ Kublai said, ‘there’s something for you to tell the Venetians when you reach home.’ Marco shook his head.

‘No, great Khan. Half of all I have seen in Cathay is difficult to believe. But to tell of this adventure would be impossible.’

‘We know it to be true,’ the Khan replied, touching the key that hung around his neck.

To this day, in what was the Imperial palace at Peking and part of which is now a museum, there is in one room a glass case with a gold chain and a key on a silk cushion.

The inscription, in Chinese, dates it from the Yuan dynasty of Kublai Khan and describes it as ‘The Key to the World’.

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